WILD HORSES

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Alphonse
Cechrala

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A NOVEL

BY

HENRY HERBERT KNIBBS

AUTHOR OF

PARTNERS OF CHANCE,
SUNDOWN SLIM,
OVERLAND RED, ETC.

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TO

JAMES FRANKLIN

INTRODUCTION

For a hundred spacious miles across the golden mesas of Arizona the wagon trail is unfenced and knows no stubborn, formal cross-gate or wood-planked cattle guard. Nearing the southern hills, blue-topped with spruce and pine, the wagon trail hesitates, then in a generous, untrammeled curve it bears eastward, passing through Solano as though the little cow-town were merely an incident, not to be taken seriously. Beyond Solano the wagon trail, constrained, ill-at-ease, and shorn of its free contours, narrows to a lane between fenced ranches — but not for long. It is obviously intent upon taking a holiday in the mountains; so presently it sweeps sedately past low, black-crested craters and progresses earnestly toward the blue timberlands of the high country, making its way like an experienced mountaineer; steadily, yet with foresight as to staggering grades and abrupt cañons. Tempted to thrust out an exploring arm and cautiously investigate the country across the Little Colorado, the old wagon trail climbs to the tree-girdled mesas of lush grass and flaming wild flowers where horses and cattle graze until winter turns them toward the plains below.

Crossing a meadow nine thousand feet above sea level, the wagon trail finally gives up its explorations to fade into faint wheel tracks and final nothingness.

Beyond the meadow where the old road ends is a bridle trail which, if followed faithfully — and it calls for exceeding great faith in horse-flesh and luck to follow it long — leads to wild cañons somberly beautiful; upland meadows where the grasses and flowers brush your stirrups as you ride; gaunt, rocky pinnacles above timber-line from which you may view immensities that subdue your ego and make you a better citizen. And incidentally, as you journey on, wild turkey, deer, blue grouse, lynx, and his alert majesty the silver-tip will share this chosen land with you and never wittingly obtrude upon your venture.

In spring and summer a band of wild horses frequents the high mesas, drifting down into the basin of the southern desert when the snow falls. Leading the band is a great gray stallion, a horse once captured and then set free. According to the local historians of Solano but one man has ever ridden the stallion, and few, save the occasional riders of the high country, have ever seen the gray leader of the wild horses running with his kind. Once the stallion was actually seen in Solano, on that memorable day when Johnny Trent rode him down from the hills as a present

for Grace Percival. Accounts differ as to why Johnny Trent, after talking with the young woman, suddenly dismounted, stripped saddle and bridle from the horse, and turned him loose. Frank Lopez, who was with Johnny at the time, might tell if he would.

Yet there is one familiar with the subsequent events in Johnny's tumultuous career who is unutterably glad that the magnificent captive was given his freedom; one who has seen the untamable gray stallion poised upon a rise as the meadow mist curled up before the morning sun, crested proud as an emperor, his mane like new-spun silk lifting in the breeze, his flanks touched with the creeping golden fire of dawn; pride of the wild in his full, dark eye, burning with scorn for all life less virile; a challenge to the skill of man to shape his like in bronze or living word.

Yet Johnny Trent once captured him, subdued him for a time, and then gave him back to freedom that he might fulfill a destiny strange and undreamed of by his captor.

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WILD HORSES

CHAPTER I

A cowboy riding Solano slope,
With a brand-new saddle and a brand-new rope,
And a grain-fed horse with a wide-awake eye,
Saw a wild horse band go rocketing by;
Then the cowboy whistled like a mockingbird,
And he sang a song that you may have heard,
And the little old song he sang that day,
Was the story of the wild horse, stallion gray.

JOHNNY TRENT, riding down from his homestead on the high mesas, kept within the morning shadows of the timberland until he came to the edge of what is known as First Meadow — a circular, tree-girdled space of wavering grasses — often the feeding-place of wild turkeys. At the meadow's rim he reined up, reached for his carbine and then, sitting straight in the saddle, he laughed. A band of wild horses broke from the middle of the meadow and, with flickering manes and tails floating on the breeze of their going, they swept across the open and into the forest beyond. Johnny counted twelve in the band, led by a high-crested gray stallion. Several times before, Johnny Trent had seen the gray, at a distance, but not until this morning had he

been close enough to realize what a magnificent animal the stallion was. "Let 'em go," said Johnny, as his own horse fretted to make a chase of it.

Crossing the sunlit meadow he again took the trail through the timber. Presently he was at the edge of another open space fronting on Twin Blue Cañon. Again he saw the wild horses bunched toward the far end of the grassy space, heads high, tails curled, sniffing the breeze. The instant they saw him they dashed toward the cañon rim, bunched, reared, and then one by one they disappeared over the rim and vanished. Johnny was tempted to take after them for the sheer fun of it — but he had a long journey ahead, so he saved his horse, jogging down the trail until it dipped into Twin Blue. Beyond the wide mouth of the cañon lay Solano, his destination and his hope. Johnny was looking for work. True, his homestead furnished grazing for his two milch cows, their calves, his three horses — grazing and good water, and the freedom of isolation. But it did not furnish coffee, flour, bacon, or clothing. Occasionally Johnny wondered why he had undertaken the task of homesteading so far from town and from a railroad.

Yet, as he gazed down upon distant Solano, sitting his horse sidewise and allowing his gaze to roam over some few hundred square miles of open

country — a land dotted with mysteriously beautiful and natural structures, time-wrought into cities, cathedrals, and all imaginable forms of romantic desert architecture, he knew why he had chosen to make a home for himself in that land. He loved it — loved the lowland spaces, the timber of the high country, the thin, pure air, the ice-cold mountain water, the vista of weird buttes shadowing the far distant plain. The country was unfenced, unspoiled. "Free country," Johnny called it. Fish and game were abundant. Horses were cheap. Of grazing there was much, with plenty of water. Once, when younger, he had left the mesas to punch cattle down in The Tonto. In two years he returned with enough money to venture on homesteading a place of his own. He was still in the twenties, his face unlined, his eyes clear and cool, his vigorous body alive in every atom.

Solano knew Johnny and liked him, from the little, barefooted Mexican children to the proprietor of the general store who was considered the richest man in the county. In fact Baker had offered to lend money on Johnny Trent's homestead, not alone because he liked the young cowboy, but because he realized that some day Johnny's place would make an excellent headquarters for tourists who would eventually "discover" one of the richest fish and game areas in

the West. Thus far Johnny had not had to borrow. With Baker's offer in mind, however, he rode into Solano and tied his horse in front of the big brick building — trading-post, incidental political headquarters, post-office, and warehouse. Baker, at his desk in the cool, ample office, scowled through his spectacles as Johnny sauntered in. Baker indicated a chair with a short, jerky gesture. He was short, stout, ruddy, bald, keen of eye, and, withal, jovial. He knew the financial standing of every individual in the county. Johnny, with his hat on his knees, stared at Baker and smiled slowly. "No, Mr. Baker, I don't want to borrow a cent. I may ask for credit. I need some flour and beans. But what I'm after is a job."

"All right!" said Baker briskly. "Build a road up to your place. Open up the country so that some of these hunting parties can get back into your location. That means trade. Trade means money, and money is what you are after, isn't it?"

"Work," declared Johnny succinctly.

"Same thing. But I'll arrange credit for you. Just tell Simpson what you want. How is the grass up your way?"

"Good. But it will be better after the July rains."

"Wish I had something for you to do — but I

haven't, just now. Got some stuff coming in next week. If you were hooked up to freight it in I could give you a job."

"No chance of riding for you this summer, Mr. Baker?"

"No. Got more boys loafing out on The Blue now than I need. Who will look after your ranch if you get work down here?"

"Oh, I can get Felipe or old Anastacio to camp up there a month or two. Or I can turn the calves loose with the cows and turn them and the horses out on the range — pick 'em up before snow flies."

"Winter," said Baker, frowning. "And four feet of snow on the level, up your way. Reminds me — only yesterday I was talking with a young lady from the East, and she wouldn't believe that we ever had snow up this way. She's boarding over at Mrs. Johnson's. Kind of resting up, I guess. Mighty pretty girl. No — it wasn't the girl. It's roads! That's it. Got a crew working on the Antelope road down near Black Mesa wash, trying to patch up the road so it will stand the rains. Frank Lopez is in charge. He's drunk — as usual. If I thought you could get any work out of that gang — you speak Spanish, don't you?"

"You're joshing me! I was just about raised on chili."

"Well, it's no kid's job, handling that bunch of never-sweats. The hardest work they do is figuring how to get out of doing any. But if you think you can get that strip of road patched up between the mesa and the wash, before the big rains, I might send you down there as foreman."

Johnny smiled. "Try it. I get along pretty well with the Chili Beans. But one thing, Mr. Baker — I want five dollars a day, and also understood with you that I don't have to lift a pick or shovel while I'm on the job."

"That's the way with all you punchers," declared Baker testily. "You want work, but you don't want to spoil your hands. Now Frank Lopez worked right along with the gang. I gave him three dollars a day and he was glad to get it."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Baker. Frank works when he sees somebody coming up the road. Most of the time he sleeps in the shade with that little old wicker jug handy. No, it won't do for a white man to get down off his horse and swing a pick with a bunch like that. If he does, he loses out, every time. Me, I aim to sit my horse and watch 'em sweat and see that they earn their wages, anyhow."

"Don't know but what you're right, Johnny. But suppose Lopez talks them into quitting, if I fire him?"

"Why, I'll just chouse over to Sandoval and

pick up five or six men and a cook, and make a regular camp of it. Did you ever figure that you lose about half a day on each man that lives in Solano and goes home each night? And then, Mr. Baker, you are too busy to get around and see what your men are doing. You just about need somebody like me to rep for you and report in once in a while. Mebby I could save you something on your freighting, too. Last time I rode over to Antelope I ran into one of your outfits at the first water-hole, and they were holding a regular fiesta about ten in the morning, instead of hooking up and pulling the grade."

"Why in thunder didn't you tell me about it! I'd have fired the whole lot of 'em."

"You see, I wasn't working for you, then."

"And you are now, eh?"

"You bet! Just send word to Lopez that I'll take charge of that road gang, and turn me loose. If I don't earn my five a day, the Mexicans will."

Baker pushed up his glasses and blinked at Johnny Trent. The storekeeper was not quite sure that Johnny was serious. He would make the experiment. "Sounds like you meant business, Johnny. Go over to Mrs. Johnson's and get your dinner. Then come back here ready to make good. I'll send word to Lopez to lay off, right now."

Johnny put on his hat, rose briskly, and trailed

his spurs across the office floor. Turning in the doorway he ventured a question. "Do I charge my dinner up to The Baker Trading Company, or pay for it myself?"

Baker swung round in his chair. "Charge it to me. I'll take a chance."

CHAPTER II

"The mesa wind blows high and free,
But never a wind can outrun me:
You may sink your rowels out of sight,
And quirt your hoss till his eye rolls white,
But I'll be far away."

MRS. JOHNSON was something more than a complacent, plump, and dark-eyed widow who furnished meals and a few well-kept rooms for those who had occasion to stop overnight in Solano; Mrs. Johnson was an institution. She was a sort of mother to half of the itinerant boarders, and aunt to the other half — punchers, freighters, and cattlemen who happened in town on various missions. Many a young cowboy had occasion to bless her when he had spent his wages foolishly and then asked her to let his little account run until he next came to town, because Mrs. Johnson seemed always benevolently unaware of the reason. And the boys always paid, eventually. Mrs. Johnson was quick with sympathy, shrewd, slow to advise, and swift to resent anything said against one of her "boys." One of these might be a young rider from the high country with a pocket full of dollars that fairly itched to get into some one's else pocket, or a deliberate, seamy-necked, and dryly humorous old cattle-

man with a fancy for sitting in at poker and a check-book equal to the occasion.

When Johnny Trent breezed into the neat and homelike dining-room that noon — having forgotten for the moment that a young lady from the East was stopping there — his exuberance suffered a check. He had intended telling Mrs. Johnson of his good luck in getting work and that he would possibly board there for a month or so. Johnny had anticipated an enthusiastic chat, but the slender, dark-eyed girl with the golden brown hair and the pongee silk gown trimmed with touches of pale green, utterly eclipsed both Mrs. Johnson and the anticipated chat. A clerk from Baker's was at the table, a pallid young fellow with a straw-colored mustache; a red-visaged cattleman from The Blue; a young ranger in to report to the supervisor; and a traveling man from Kansas City. Johnny nodded to the guests in a general way and was about to sit down when Mrs. Johnson introduced him formally to the new guest, Miss Percival. Johnny bowed and hesitated. Miss Percival's brown eyes widened the least bit as though she were suddenly interested and pleased to behold such a striking young example of the real West, booted and belted and carelessly unaware of its picturesque individuality. Johnny's pulse quickened at the unspoken flattery. He was all but swamped with emotion

when Miss Percival, with the merest hesitation in the world, offered her slim and graceful hand in greeting. Her brown eyes widened again as Johnny grasped her hand and shook it heartily. Nor could Johnny understand why a slight frown touched Mrs. Johnson's comely forehead as he sat down and glanced swiftly at his hostess, who, in turn, glanced swiftly, questioningly at Miss Percival. Weeks later Mrs. Johnson said to Julia Baker: "I knew it — the minute she shook hands with him!"

Johnny was not altogether embarrassed — but he was exceedingly interested and curious. He ate deliberately and tried not to look at the girl from the city. Yet he glanced at her many times during the dinner hour. Something about her fascinated him. Johnny Trent had met few women — and never one like her. There was an assurance mingled with a peculiar expression of timidity that set her apart from the rest of the feminine world. And her eyes! Johnny could think of nothing but a startled doe grazing in some mountain meadow, surprised by the appearance of a man — the warm, dark color of eyes timid, questioning.

Johnny would have been ready to do battle had any one suggested that Miss Percival used her fine eyes as she did — with deliberate intent to ensnare. But why not? If our immortal

Mother Eve in her younger days yearned for a change of menu, it's a cinch — speaking in a roundabout way — that Eve glanced significantly at the apple tree, and that Adam saw the apple mirrored in her eyes.

Mrs. Johnson asked Johnny if he would be in town overnight. He suddenly realized that he would be in town many nights — and he flushed boyishly as he briefly outlined his plans for the summer. Mrs. Johnson led him to talk about his plans and his prospects, his homestead, and the precarious livelihood of a homesteader. Johnny resented what appeared to be an attempt to enlighten Miss Percival as to his social and financial standing in the community — a subject which would have been more or less of a joke had the young lady from the East not been present. He felt as though Mrs. Johnson, for some peculiar reason, was taking a mean advantage of the occasion — and he had never known her to be mean. His one solace came after dinner when he sought a veranda chair for a smoke and incidentally to wait for an opportunity to chat with his landlady. Miss Percival, who had disappeared immediately after dinner, swept regally out to the wide shady veranda and without any apparent timidity enthroned herself in the big rocking-chair next to Johnny, and asked him to tell her all about homesteading and cowboys. It was a large order — but

Johnny did his best to fill it. With quickened interest in her personality he became enthusiastic in describing his place in the hills, the bigness of the country and its beauty. He was at his best, and utterly unaware that the girl from the East was drawing him out with all the subtlety she possessed — and for no other reason than leavening the drear monotony of Solano, of which, thus far, she had only seen the outer walls and habiliments. Grace Percival had come to Solano to rest. "For her health," as Mrs. Johnson put it later — "but not for ours."

Johnny Trent knew little enough about women. He was so utterly a man's man that Miss Percival became interested in spite of herself and determined that that which had begun as a mild flirtation should continue, as a diversion, so long as she stayed in the mesa town. Then, it would give her something to write about when she answered letters from her guardian in Chicago. He would be amused, hearing that she had made another tentative conquest. He would also be jealous, because he was administrator of her estate and wanted to marry her. His fortune and hers combined would make him one of the wealthiest men in the Middle West.

Johnny Trent did not realize, until he had left Mrs. Johnson's and was waiting for Baker in the latter's office, that the young lady from the city

had done all the listening and that he had done all the talking. Yet he was a bit mistaken in his conclusion. True, he had talked — but so had Miss Percival — with her eyes. Admiration, interest, query, sympathy — expressed even more eloquently than in speech — and so much more safely! Grace Percival was young in years, but she was as old as Circe in experience. Mrs. Johnson had been told that Miss Percival had come to Solano to rest. Already Mrs. Johnson had begun to surmise that this young woman's manner of resting would not be conducive to a like condition among the masculine population of the town.

But Johnny, being a mere man, and a Westerner, never for a moment dreamed that the girl from the city was anything but a charming invalid, heart-free and mightily interested in the country and its folk. He was so filled with the idea that he mentioned it to Baker, who smiled non-committally and immediately turned to a matter of much deeper interest to him — the repairing of the mesa road between Black Mesa and the draw. Johnny was given detailed instructions, and a note to Frank Lopez which informed that bibulous individual that his time as foreman of the road gang had expired. Johnny served this notice that afternoon and discharged two of Lopez's men who seemed inclined to resent a new foreman. Lopez spent the afternoon screwing his

courage up to a point where he could make it stick long enough to challenge Johnny to mortal combat for having ousted him from an easy job. Johnny, of course, knew nothing of this until he returned to Solano that evening with his men.

Mrs. Johnson said nothing about Miss Percival's absence from the supper table until Johnny questioned her. Then Mrs. Johnson told him that Miss Percival had a slight headache and was resting in her room. Mrs. Johnson also told herself that Miss Percival's headache had been prearranged — that the young lady had stayed away from the table that evening deliberately, knowing how effective her absence would be under the circumstances. It was. Johnny felt disappointed, even cheated of an anticipated enjoyment. He strayed out to the veranda, smoked a cigarette and wondered why the town seemed "so blamed empty." It was not so blamed empty as he thought it was — for it stands to reason that if one person can make a town seem empty, another, under certain conditions, may make the same town seem exceedingly populous. Something like a half-hour after Johnny had smoked his first cigarette, Frank Lopez did his best to prove the town not devoid of interest.

Grace Percival, having deliberately recovered from her headache, appeared on the veranda, gowned exquisitely in a pale-green silk creation,

stylishly severe, yet exceedingly effective with her golden-brown hair and dark eyes. There were no jewels upon her slender fingers. The only adornment noticeable was a jade bracelet and a thin gold chain with a jade ornament, curiously carved. Johnny rose and bowed, hat in hand. Miss Percival sank into the chair nearest him and, taking his hat, examined it. Laughing, she put it on. Her glance was a challenge.

"Looks mighty pretty," blurted Johnny, feeling that he simply had to make some comment. In fact her eyes had demanded it. "But it don't go with that dress, somehow."

With indolent grace she laid the sombrero aside.

"Now if you was to dress up in riding-clothes, and then wore a Stetson —" said Johnny.

"You think it would be becoming?"

"I'll just bet it would!"

"I'll send for my riding things to-morrow," declared Grace Percival easily. And that was all — which was more than sufficient to make Johnny feel that she was sending for her riding-habit simply to please him.

The mesa road entered the town of Solano with some diffidence, but it never became a street, remaining always the old wagon trail from Antelope on the north to Solano in the southern foothills. But Solano folk called it a street from Baker's store to the first ranch east of and adjoining

the town. Most of the buildings were of adobe — a few of brick or stone — and all seemed comfortably settled for life except the small wooden church, which, owing to its aspiring but sadly disproportioned half-tower and two small, round, and useless windows above the entrance, looked as though it would welcome a cloudburst that might float it off to that far shore where demented architects could use it as a house-boat. The low, flat-roofed adobes were of a neutral brown, too dark to reflect anything save the comfortable indifference of their occupants. Baker's square brick store looked solid and business-like, like its owner. Two or three of the more pretentious dwellings were of stone, and shaded by dusty cottonwood trees. The local livery was like all other small-town public stables, with the inevitable false front, grimy cobwebbed windows, and darkly mysterious interior. The cantina, with its sky-blue door, hitch-rail, and rickety porch-roof, bore no lettered sign of its excuse for existing, yet it was never mistaken for a library. The Mexican poolroom was next door to the cantina, and not an integral part of it for the very good reason that the proprietor of the poolroom could, and would, upon demand, shave or cut hair. His place was popular as a sort of club wherein the Mexican population, especially, foregathered and chattered in the evenings.

A lean, shaggy dog stood just outside the doorway of the poolroom, obviously waiting for some one. The evening air was pleasantly cool. The street was tinged with a faint golden light from the setting sun. At the farther end of the boarding-house veranda three of Mrs. Johnson's boarders sat conversing in a low tone and casting occasional glances at Grace Percival and Johnny Trent. He asked her to tell him about Chicago, but she shook her head, declaring that she was infinitely more interested in Solano and its people. Some of the Mexicans were picturesque and interesting, she thought. She asked Johnny if he spoke Spanish. Learning that he did, she wondered if he would teach her to speak it. This implied a future companionship that was not at all displeasing to Johnny, who promised to teach her what he knew of the language, and suggested that she ask him the Spanish for any word she wished to know. Miss Percival hesitated, then gestured gracefully toward the poolroom down the street. A Mexican had just come from the place. The shaggy dog was following him. Johnny glanced carelessly in the direction indicated, and he smiled. "That's Frank Lopez, and he ain't just what you'd call sober."

Lopez came opposite the boarding-house, stopped in the middle of the street, and then headed for the veranda. Johnny greeted him

pleasantly. Within six feet of the veranda rail Lopez steadied himself and addressed Johnny in Spanish. Johnny was incidentally glad that Miss Percival did not understand the language, just then. Not realizing the situation, she asked Johnny what the other was saying. She felt piqued that Johnny paid so little attention to her question and so much attention to the Mexican. Johnny excused himself, and vaulting the veranda rail stepped up to Lopez and spoke to him in a quiet tone. Lopez gesticulated and argued. Johnny turned his back and walked toward the poolroom down the street. Lopez followed, still chattering and gesticulating. Miss Percival realized that the Mexican was drunk; but she could see no reason for Johnny Trent's abrupt behavior. The group of men on the farther end of the veranda had risen and were sauntering down the street. Suddenly Mrs. Johnson appeared.

"Was that Frank Lopez carrying on out here?" she queried.

Miss Percival raised her eyebrows slightly. Mrs. Johnson's tone had been peremptory.

"I can't say. I think Mr. Trent said it was Frank Lopez."

"Where's Johnny Trent?" queried Mrs. Johnson.

"Really!" Miss Percival's tone was a rebuke.

Mrs. Johnson shook her head. "I knew it!" she declared ambiguously, and vanished into the house.

Lopez had but one idea, and that was to exterminate the man who had succeeded him as boss of the road gang. It had taken much liquor to arrive at this conclusion, and Lopez had arrived. Back of the poolroom the Mexican prepared to follow up his declaration of cutting Johnny into small pieces and feeding him to his dog. With Johnny trying to reason with him, Lopez jerked a knife from his pocket and slashed at Johnny's face. Johnny jumped away. The point of the knife slit his coat-sleeve from shoulder to elbow. It was Johnny's best coat, donned especially for the occasion of Miss Percival's presence. Johnny did not resent the drunken rage of the Mexican half so much as he resented the damage to his coat. As Lopez lurched forward, Johnny planted a hundred-and-seventy-odd pounds of live weight on the Mexican's jaw. The battle was as brief and conclusive as Cæsar's letter. Lopez went down in a heap. Johnny picked up the knife and handed it to one of the men who came hurriedly round the corner of the poolroom. There had been no noise, no outcry. Only three men had witnessed the combat. The Mexican's dog stood over his fallen master. The dog showed his fangs and bristled. The sallow clerk from Baker's

drew a small automatic from his hip-pocket and offered it to Johnny.

"What for?" queried Johnny, waving the proffered pistol away.

The clerk mumbled something about "killing the dog if he showed fight."

"This don't call for a gun," declared Johnny, glancing at the slit in his coat-sleeve.

"What do you aim to do with him?" asked the cattleman from The Blue, gesturing toward Lopez.

"Frank? Why, let him sleep it off. It's cooler out here than in the little old 'dobe jail. And say, don't spread the news of this ruckus. Frank was drunk. He ain't a bad Mexican when he's sober."

"That's right," said the cattleman turning to the clerk and the drummer from Kansas City. "We'll just pull our freight like we had stepped down here to have a little private talk — or a drink, mebby. If nobody tells Lopez he got licked, mebby-so he'll forget just how it happened." The old cattleman turned to Johnny. "But next time, son, you want to use that gun you pack under your arm. I admire to say that you're a right forgivin' hombre not to bust him wide open when he came for you with that knife. You can pick your string from my cavvy any time you want a job."

"I'm obliged," said Johnny, "but Baker has just put me on, handling the road gang."

"Now I get the hang of it," declared the cattleman. "First off, I thought that Lopez insulted that city girl, back yonder."

Johnny slipped out of his coat, folded it, and carried it over his arm as the group sauntered back to the veranda. Miss Percival smiled encouragingly as he hesitated to take the chair he had so recently vacated. She patted the chair invitingly. Her face was delicately flushed, her fine eyes warm with interest. Johnny's heart thumped. He sat down and draped his coat across the veranda rail.

"It *is* warm," said Miss Percival. "And you seem more like yourself without a coat."

"I — yes, mam, it's right warm for a cool evening. Now about talking Spanish — "

Miss Percival's gaze was fixed on Johnny's shirt-sleeve, which, unknown to him, was also slit from shoulder to elbow, and as he bent his arm, a thin, red scratch showed on his firm white skin. He was conscious of her scrutiny, but altogether unaware of the reason for it. Her gaze lifted to his face. "What happened?" she whispered.

"Why — I had a little talk with that Mexican you saw, about a job."

Miss Percival leaned back in her chair and studied Johnny's face with an inscrutable gaze

that sent the blood racing through his veins. It seemed to him as though they had suddenly become intimate friends — that a glance, a gesture, a silence, was mutually understood, without necessity for speech. And Miss Percival appeared exceedingly attractive in the fading light of the setting sun. Her jade-green gown seemed iridescent, like the iris of a peacock feather. The smooth, faultless line of her chin, the curve of her cheek, the now somber brown depths of her eyes, and the tawny-gold mass of her hair, in the all-but-dusk of that summer evening would have charmed a much more sophisticated man than Johnny Trent. Then there was the additional charm of poise and the extreme contrast of each to each — itself potent with possibilities. Johnny was hard hit, and he knew it.

"About a job," he reiterated, hardly realizing that he had spoken.

"Are you sure it wasn't about me?"

"Yes, mam."

Miss Percival laughed softly. "How did you happen to cut your arm?"

Johnny straightened his arm and glanced at the slit in his shirt-sleeve. "Damn Lopez!" he blurted.

Snatching his coat from the veranda rail he rose and, without a word to his companion, marched into the boarding-house.

Grace Percival smiled to herself in the dusk. She toyed caressingly with the jade bracelet on her wrist. The sun was gone. Darkness suddenly obliterated the angles of the buildings across the way. The stars expanded from mere pin-points of pallid fire to a mellow brilliance. "I suppose he could be tamed," she murmured. Then she rose and swept languidly into the house and up the narrow stairway to her room. She shrugged her shoulders as she stood gazing at the quaint, old-fashioned wall-paper, the marble-topped wash-stand and dresser, the walnut rocking-chair, and the ample and neatly made bed. Then she smiled as she viewed herself in the mirror. The oil-lamp, which she had lighted as she came in, was smoking. She turned it low. "Curtain," she murmured, intimating to herself, watching herself, that the evening performance was concluded. From down the hall came the clink of a wash-pitcher against a basin. Then the vigorous splashing of water. Commingled with the splashing came the sound of a song, not boisterous, but virile and distinct:

"I'm hard to catch and hard to tame,
I got no brand — but I got a name;
So when you think to down my pride,
Build a right-swift loop and build it wide,
For I'm called stallion gray:

"The mesa wind blows high and free,
But never a wind can outrun me.

You can sink your rowels out of sight,
And quirt your hoss till his eye rolls white,
But I'll be far away . . .
But I'll be far away."

Standing in her dimly lighted room, Grace Percival listened. A peculiar expression flitted across her face. "But I'll be far away," she whispered — and laughed softly. She stepped out in the hall, and tapped at the door of Johnny Trent's room. The splashing ceased.

"That you, Miss Johnson?" came in Johnny's robust voice. Then he stepped close to the closed door.

"If you will hang your coat on the doorknob, I'll come and get it, and mend it," said Miss Percival. "Good-night."

Johnny blinked, ran his fingers through his damp hair, stared at the doorknob. "All right. And thanks." He listened with his head close to the door. "She said, 'Good-night.' She thinks I had that little argument with Lopez on her account. Well, Frank did kind of include her in what he called me — in Spanish. Shucks! I got to tell her different."

Johnny put on the clean shirt which he had carried rolled in his slicker, combed his hair, brushed his Stetson with his elbow, dusted his boots with one of Mrs. Johnson's neatly ironed towels, and, catching up his coat, strode out and

hung the garment on the doorknob of the room up the hall. As he turned the angle of the hallway toward the stairs, he all but ran into Mrs. Johnson, who stared at him, recovered herself, and stepped aside as he apologized.

He clattered on down and out to the dim, starlit street. He crossed over to Baker's house back of the cottonwoods. The picket gate clicked behind him. The wide front door was open. A hanging lamp shed a glow down the graveled pathway. The rest of the house was in darkness.

"Good-evening," came from the depths of the veranda.

"Good-evening, Miss Baker. I just stepped round to speak to your father."

"Dad's out — somewhere. He left right after supper. Won't you come in?"

"Thanks. It's right pleasant out here on the steps. I'll wait a few minutes. Mebby your father will be back soon. How is that little coyote I fetched in from the Black Mesa?"

"Oh, he's as tame as a coyote ever gets. I'm going to let him go."

"Guess that's right, Miss Baker. I fetched him in to you because I didn't want to kill the little squee — but I ought to done it." Johnny rolled a cigarette and smoked. Julia Baker, because she knew him so well, did not again invite him to come up and sit on the veranda with her, but

came and sat beside him on the steps. They had been friends for a long time, ever since they were children. Then, Johnny had called her Julia, but of late he always addressed her as "Miss Baker." This evening Johnny felt peculiarly unlike himself, in that he could find nothing to say to Julia whom he had always liked and admired for her frankness.

"Did you really have a fight with Frank Lopez, this evening?" Her question startled him, annoyed him.

"Who's been telling you that?" he asked sharply.

"Why, everybody in town knows it. Simpson told father. Simpson said he thought you fought about that woman from Chicago — that Frank Lopez insulted her, or something."

"Well, there wasn't any fight — regular. Frank and I had a word or two."

"Oh, it doesn't really matter. She's awfully pretty, though, isn't she?"

"She's kind of interesting — and different. I just met her to-day." Johnny's tone was deliberately casual.

"Dad told us you were going to take charge of the road work. I suppose you'll stay at Mrs. Johnson's this summer?"

"I figured to. I'll be there evenings."

"Mrs. Johnson's place is interesting — and

different," declared Julia, somewhat caustically.

Johnny glanced at her, and he saw her smile. Johnny frowned. "If you're meaning Mrs. Johnson's is different since Miss Percival came to board there — it sure is!"

"I'm awfully glad," sighed Julia.

"And likewise sarcastic," said Johnny.

"Really? I didn't know it. Would you call it sarcastic if I offered to mend your coat? Jimmy Simpson said that Lopez slashed your sleeve with his knife, when you were having that little word or two. Of course —"

"Thanks," said Johnny stiffly. "But it just so happens that my coat is being mended right now. Guess your dad ain't coming back right away. I'll be saying good-night." And Johnny rose and raised his hat with the formality of offended youth. He strode down the path a pace or two, then turned. "Good-night, Miss Julia."

"Oh, haven't you gone yet?"

She laughed. Johnny swung away, his back stiff, his boot heels clicking down the gravel path. "Damn Frank Lopez!" he muttered.

It scarcely occurred to Johnny that in quarreling with Julia Baker when she was simply teasing him, he was admitting that he cared considerably for her opinion. And he could hardly be supposed to know that Julia's slightly sarcastic remarks in-

dicated an interest in him that she herself would have denied to any one but herself. Julia Baker was rather plump, practical, fair-haired, gray-eyed — a girl loyal to her community while realizing its shortcomings. She kept house for her father, who was a widower. Simpson the clerk would have been glad to marry her. Julia was exceedingly fond of Johnny Trent.

Shortly after Johnny left Mrs. Johnson's to call at the Bakers', Miss Percival stepped quietly from her room and down the hallway. Johnny's coat was *not* hanging on the doorknob for the very good reason that Mrs. Johnson was busily mending the slashed sleeve in her own room. Mrs. Johnson, coming up from the kitchen, had overheard Miss Percival offer to mend the coat. Mrs. Johnson was not eavesdropping intentionally.

"Mend his coat, indeed!" Mrs. Johnson was saying as her needle flickered back and forth. Yet she had to admit that the offer in itself was kindly enough, especially as swift-footed gossip had it that Johnny Trent had battled with Lopez because the Mexican had insulted Miss Percival. "And it was about that road job — or I don't know Frank Lopez," said Mrs. Johnson as she completed her task and stepped to the kitchen to heat an iron. She worked swiftly and efficiently.

Miss Percival, lying on her bed reading, heard Mrs. Johnson come upstairs and then descend

again to her own room. She laid the novel aside, yawned prettily, rose and slipped from her room to Johnny's door, and glided back swiftly with the mended coat. About ten minutes later Johnny came in. As he passed her door, she opened it. He stopped as the light shot across the dim hallway. "Your coat," she said, smiling. He had a vision of a lissom creature in pale pink diaphanous silk, of a slender, rounded arm, and a mass of golden-brown hair. Then he was in his room, gazing at the neatly mended sleeve. "She's a regular humdinger!" he exclaimed soulfully. "She can sew! Who'd ever guess she could do a job like that? Can't hardly see where it's mended. I bet she's a peach in riding-clothes. Now you might say riding-clothes is all the clothes I got."

Johnny sat on the edge of the bed, his elbows on his knees, his chin in his hands. It struck him suddenly that he wasn't a millionaire, nor well-to-do, or even able to command a decent salary. "Now I wonder how she came to pick on me — right from the start?" he asked himself. "It can't be for my money — so it must be my good looks." He grinned boyishly.

Miss Percival heard a vigorous chant coming from the end of the hall.

> ". . You can quirt your hoss till his eye rolls white,
> But I'll be far away."

CHAPTER III

"For such would I pawn my hope of rest in that far, dim Otherwhere;
For such would I filch the silver dust that floats in the starlit air,
Melt it, mould it, and draw it, till fashioned a slender rod,
Then shaped round the horn of the anvil-moon that he should go silver-shod."

JOHNNY kept his men at it, with team and scraper, shovel and pick and bar, accomplishing more in one week than Lopez had in two. It was evident that the road job would not last more than a month at the rate he was going. He was out each morning on his bay pony Chico and planning each day's work before the road gang arrived. And while bossing the job he was seldom afoot. Consequently the men loading rock in the wagons in an arroyo, a quarter of a mile from the road, kept busy, not knowing at what moment he might appear; and the men on the road worked under a similar and alert supervision. Often Johnny sat his horse, from the vantage of some knoll watching the operations for an hour or more without changing his position or issuing an order. He knew his men, and the prestige of a man in the saddle. Each morning he invariably began operations by asking: "Anybody want to quit this morning?" Repetition tinged the question with a humorous quality which the Mexicans ap-

preciated while realizing that he would have discharged them all without hesitation and replaced them with men from Salvador. Baker left him to himself, satisfied that Johnny was saving him money.

Each evening Johnny rode back to Solano and spent the hours after supper chatting with Grace Percival on the boarding-house veranda, or walking with her down the long street to the foothills and back — moonlight hours on a winding, white road bordered with fantastic shadows of brush and rock. Solano folk talked — but Johnny was utterly oblivious to anything save his work and Grace Percival. Julia Baker was not altogether pleased, yet she did not join in the town gossip, but kept to herself, hoping that the girl from Chicago would grow tired of Solano and the companionship of Johnny Trent.

If Grace Percival overheard an occasional remark hinting at the absurdity of Johnny Trent "keeping company" with her, it in no way affected her attitude toward him or toward the townspeople, whom she ignored with polite indifference. There were three exceptions, however: Mrs. Johnson, who had suddenly become quite friendly, Alonzo Baker, and his daughter Julia. Miss Percival was invited to dine at the Bakers' home — and the president of the Baker Trading Company found her interesting and different.

Yet, unlike Johnny Trent, Baker never took Miss Percival seriously, but joked with her in his bluff, hearty way, and hinted that Solano was not the worst place in the world in which to settle permanently. And Julia Baker, like Mrs. Johnson, suddenly decided to be nice to Miss Percival, whose gowns and jewels she admired and whose poise she envied. Miss Percival frequently spent the afternoon at the Baker home. Julia Baker, realizing how completely Johnny was enmeshed, went over to the enemy — with mental reservations, however.

The post-office was in Baker's store. When Miss Percival's mail arrived, Julia Baker always delivered it to her personally. When the package containing Miss Percival's riding-habit arrived, Julia Baker also delivered that — and was invited by Miss Percival to inspect it, which led to a promise on Julia's part to find a good saddle-horse for her. A few days later Julia sent over a little formal note inviting Grace Percival to a ride on the mesas. Miss Percival replied, by messenger, that she would be delighted to accept. At two that afternoon Miss Percival appeared on the veranda of Mrs. Johnson's place attired in English whipcord riding-breeches and coat, brown leather boots, a gray silk waist with mannish collar and tie, and a stylish, soft felt sport hat, with a soft rolled gray silk band. And she

was Grace — all of it, with the added charm of excellent form in sitting a horse. Yes, she had ridden much, she told Julia, both at home and abroad; in England, at Monaco, in Vienna, and Germany. She was not accustomed to a Western saddle, but the one which Miss Baker had provided seemed quite satisfactory. Nor was she accustomed to single reins, but that, she informed Julia, was a mere detail.

Julia Baker had deliberately secured an active horse, which she had hoped would discourage the young woman from Chicago — but the young woman from Chicago, having three Kentucky saddle-animals and two imported English hunters in her own stables, sat the quick little Western pony with a thoroughbred assurance that was a revelation to Miss Julia. In fact Julia Baker made the mistake of premising that horsemanship was a matter of latitude. Riders in her country called an English saddle a "poultice."

Grace Percival was oblivious to the curious glances cast at her, while Julia was uncomfortably conscious of her own faded riding-skirt and simple but exceedingly durable equipment. Out on the mesa beyond town they put their horses to a lope. Miss Percival rode with the same assurance with which she walked across a room or flung a wrap about her shoulders. Without a definite objective they took the road leading to

the Black Mesa, finally pulling their horses to a walk.

"You ride well," declared Miss Percival.

Julia flushed. "Oh, everybody rides, out here." Julia Baker resented what she deemed patronage.

"Johnny looks well on a horse," continued Grace Percival, gesturing down the road where Johnny, in the saddle as usual, was watching the laborers.

"Oh — you mean Mr. Trent?"

"Oh, dear, no! Johnny could never be Mr. Trent to his friends. He's such a charming boy — interesting, and different."

Julia Baker bit her lip. She was tired of hearing people describe other people as "interesting and different." She did not know what to say — and she wanted to say something. She thought it would not sound out of tune to speak of the road work, just then. "Yes," she concurred with an effort, "Mr. Trent is interesting and different, and I know nearly all the real riders down this way. I suppose you heard about his fight with Frank Lopez? Frank Lopez used to be foreman of the road gang. Johnny asked Dad for the job, and got it. They say Frank Lopez slashed Johnny with a knife."

"Yes, I heard," declared Miss Percival. "Johnny told me, only he didn't put it just that

way. I suppose he'll be rather surprised to see us. I didn't know just where he was working."

"He doesn't really work very much," said Julia, as though defending the dignity of Johnny's position of foreman.

"Do you think one has to — if one has personality enough to manage people?" queried Grace Percival sweetly.

Julia was saved the necessity of a reply by the arrival of Johnny Trent who had recognized who his visitors were and had ridden to meet them. He doffed his hat, dismounted, shook hands with Julia and then with her companion. Julia thought that Grace Percival's hand lingered longer in Johnny's than the occasion seemed to call for.

"Mighty pleasant to have you ride over and visit our camp," Johnny was saying. He nodded and smiled at Julia, then turned toward Grace Percival. "That's the draw I was telling you about, day before yesterday. We aim to lay a concrete road across that stretch. Nothing else'll hold against high water. And say, Grace — about that saddle of Turner's; it's genuine hand-carved, and I think it would suit you. If you want it, I can get it for you for fifty dollars, which is mighty reasonable."

"If you think it would suit me —" Grace Percival was smiling down at Johnny, and it was

only too obvious that she was not thinking of saddlery.

"So," thought Julia Baker, "it's 'Johnny' and 'Grace,' now!" A sudden hot anger flamed in Julia's face. The woman from Chicago was playing with Johnny — leading him on, making a fool of him. Yet Johnny did not look so very much like a fool as he stood, hat in hand, talking with the stylishly clad girl. He looked, in fact, rather masterful and independent. Julia herself felt utterly helpless, inexperienced — a toy in the hands of so clever a person as Miss Percival. If Johnny only knew how heartless and unscrupulous these society women were! Julia Baker turned toward Miss Percival. "If you're interested in the road work, I think I'll ride over to the Brown ranch, and see Mrs. Brown."

Grace Percival turned, noticed the expression on Julia Baker's face, and smiled. "I don't mind, Johnny can ride home with me. Of course I'd rather go with you — but you haven't invited me, have you?"

That was the last straw, Julia pulled her horse round. Her pretty, flushed face betrayed her anger. "Just as you wish, Miss Percival. I'm sure Mr. Trent will not object." And she lifted her pony to a lope.

"What's it all about?" queried Johnny, grinning.

"I'm sure I don't know. Julia is displeased about something."

"I don't see what made her mad," declared Johnny — although he did see, with all his eyes. And then: "Grace, when you're dressed like that you look prettier than I ever thought a girl could look. I just want to tell you that. Let's ride over to the juniper, where there's some shade. Say, you ought to have a real horse, that could step. The little bay is all right, but he ain't up to your style."

Grace Percival laughed. Johnny Trent was so utterly frank and sincere. Johnny swung up on his horse and they rode slowly across the golden mesa toward the distant juniper, the cowboy sitting his horse like a young conqueror, his gaze fixed on the eastern hills, for the moment oblivious to the shimmering sunlight, the girl riding beside him, the workmen down the road.

Presently she reined her horse close and touched Johnny's arm. "What are you dreaming about, laddie?"

"You," he said, without turning.

In the shade of the big juniper they dismounted, dropped the reins, stood gazing out across the spaces. The mesa grass, as yet untouched by summer rains, moved in gentle undulations of pallid gold as the breeze ran lightly down the slope of the far hills. The naked buttes,

wind-worn and sharply defined in the clear light, were magic fortresses, enchanted citadels of amethyst, sentinels of silence, each in its isolated majesty a perfection weirdly beautiful and each of individual hue and charm. South ran the Blue Range, its several cañons sealed with black shadows. And over all a turquoise sky, and light indescribable which revealed in infinite detail, and yet mocked the imagination, cheating the gaze that sought to measure distances, and playing with realities until all became unreal, mysterious.

Grace Percival, her eyes alight with a new interest, experienced for the first time the actual charm of Arizona. She felt free to do as she pleased, to journey forever, with no objective, and no thought of time, or a returning. She yearned to live as the folk of the open country live — to be herself; to find, beyond the farthest range, another land, even more wonderful than the land upon which she gazed.

Johnny Trent, standing close to her, was speaking. "I know the horse for you! He's the gray stallion that leads that band of wild horses up in the high country. He's like a streak of mist when the wind drives down a cañon after the rain. Silver-gray, with a dark mane and tail. I reckon his dam was a white mustang, and his sire must have been a thunder-cloud. He just floats over

the ground, leading his band of rope-dodgers — and he's the proudest animal I ever laid eyes on. But he's wild! I've laid my twine on a few wild horses —"

Grace Percival heard him, his voice low, intense; an accompaniment to her vision of illimitable spaces, of the freedom of the wild. Yet she could not withdraw her gaze from the golden mesas, the changing hues of spire and minaret and shadowed wall. "Wild horses!" she whispered, echoing his words.

"That horse — they call him Stallion Gray. He's never been caught. Sometimes they can be tamed. I don't know. I've seen a horse like that let a woman handle him when he wouldn't let a man come near." Johnny pushed back his hat. His young face was radiant, his blue eyes glowing with admiration, sentiment, enthusiasm. He could picture this girl riding the great gray stallion, the untamed horse of the high country. Slowly Grace Percival turned her head. Her eyes were wide, filled with a dream. A horse like the silver mist of rain blown by the wind! A brute unconquerable; a fierce danger, a delight! She breathed deep, nor did she realize that the spell of the land was upon her, that not until that moment had she ever been her true self, untrammeled by convention, the heritage of wealth and artificiality. And then, she was in Johnny's

strong young arms, her face upturned to his, her lips parted, trembling.

"And now," she said, drawing away from his embrace, leaving his arms empty, his heart hungry for another kiss, "catch the gray stallion for me! Break him! I want to see him fight, and see you master him! I want him, as I never wanted anything in my life!"

"Yes, mam," said Johnny quaintly. "That will be my next job."

CHAPTER IV

"The filly won't stand for curb and spur,
She'll plunge and rear and fight:
But use the snaffle and talk to her,
And she'll travel as sweet as light."

HAVING decided that she would make Julia Baker apologize for her rudeness, Grace Percival asked Johnny the way to the Brown ranch. Johnny, disappointed, and a bit surprised, indicated a hill to the west of the road camp. He offered to accompany her, but Grace Percival said she preferred to go alone. It was but a mile or so to the ranch and there was no possibility of getting lost.

Julia Baker was surprised when she met Miss Percival riding across the mesa toward Brown's. Julia had made but a brief visit, and her temper having cooled, she decided to ride back to the road camp as though nothing had happened, and show, if merely by her presence, that she wished to be friendly.

Grace Percival was first to speak. "It was dreadfully dull at the road camp," she said, reining her horse round and riding beside Julia. "And I had rather ride home with you than with Johnny, as much as I admire him. Don't you think you were the least bit unkind when

you rode away, leaving me to make the best of an awkward situation?"

Julia flushed and felt instantly guilty of having acted like an unmannerly child. She had been hasty; and Miss Percival's manner was so sincere and friendly. "I'm sorry —" she faltered.

"Of course you are. So am I. You had a right to do as you pleased." Grace Percival's fine eyes became misty, as though some unhappy memory had touched her. A slight pause emphasized what seemed to be a difficulty in proceeding. Then, "Julia, you are the only woman who has shown me any real kindness since I came here — alone. Mrs. Johnson tolerates me because I pay her well for my room and meals. It was a big change to come here from Chicago. I felt terribly lonely at first. And I was not feeling at all well. My mother and father separated, years ago. They are both dead. I have no relatives. Of course I have money; but my guardian, who was father's business partner, is impossible. It happens that his name is Samuel Percival, although he is not related to our family. He is a stockbroker, and conducts business under the old firm name, Percival & Percival. It has led to endless complications, socially. I left Chicago really because he insists, almost every time he sees me, upon marrying me. Of course he wants to get complete control of my money. Recently he be-

came so obnoxious to me that I simply left town and came out here. I'll not tell you what I know of him. And you can hardly realize how helpless I was to avoid him socially. He made business his constant excuse to call upon me, and be seen with me. It seems that father's will left about everything in his hands. I have had different attorneys investigate. They say there is nothing to do but wait until I am twenty-four; then I will have charge of my own affairs. Poor father was so afraid that some one would marry me simply for my money that he stipulated in his will that I was not to have control of it until I was twenty-four. But I must not thrust my troubles upon you. I want to get really well and strong, and stay here just as long as I can" — Grace Percival smiled sweetly — "and feel that I have one little friend at least, who understands."

Julia Baker was filled with quick sympathy. She was flattered by this display of confidence, and her intuition told her that Miss Percival really liked her. Yet Julia could not forget that Johnny Trent was infatuated with Miss Percival.

"I'm sorry I got huffy," declared Julia. "And I am sorry that you have been unhappy. But — is it fair to Johnny Trent?"

"My liking him because he is such a nice boy? If you'll introduce me to a nicer boy in Solano —" Grace Percival laughed softly. She

avoided the issue by a subtle change of subject. "Johnny was telling me about the wild horses of the high mesas, this afternoon. He said they were wonderful creatures, especially one — a gray stallion that led them. He offered to catch the stallion and break him for me to ride. Do you think he meant it — or was he carried away by enthusiasm?"

"Oh, if Johnny said he would catch the stallion and break him, he'll do it. But Stallion Gray — as we call him — is an outlaw. I don't believe any one could break him. I have known men to be killed trying to break horses like him. But Johnny Trent would take any risk to make his word good."

A startled expression touched Grace Percival's dark eyes — and was gone. Then she talked of clothes — a subject especially dear to Julia Baker, who could have anything within reason that she wished, but often did not know what to wish for. "You admired my riding-habit this morning. Won't you let me send to Chicago for you and have one made? You have a good figure, and my habit would almost fit you. Suppose you come over to my room after we get in this afternoon, and we'll see what we can do."

"If I could have some riding-clothes like yours —" Julia hesitated, wondering what the townsfolk would think and say if she appeared in

garments of such an ultra-fashionable cut. Yet she knew that girls were now wearing jacket and breeches — a truly sensible costume, despite local comment. Bertha Judd, of the Diamond-S ranch, wore such apparel, and Bertha could have anything she desired in the way of clothing. Her father was wealthy. "I *would* like a suit like yours," confessed Julia. "I don't think father would mind."

"Of course not! I'll be glad to take the responsibility. And please call me 'Grace.' 'Miss Percival' is so stiff, and formal. And that will help me forget many things I wish to forget."

Julia Baker laughed happily. They rode across the sunlit mesa, side by side — the girl from the East and the girl of the West, companions, yet widely separated by tradition and social circumstance. Curiously enough Grace Percival was thinking that Julia would make an excellent wife for Johnny Trent — a sensible girl who would demand so little and be so much to him. And Julia Baker, in the most matter-of-fact way in the world, was thinking that Grace Percival, despite her wealth and her personal attractiveness, would *not* make a good wife for Johnny Trent — that she could never be satisfied with Johnny's limitations as to education and ambition — for Johnny could never be anything other than a cattleman, and would never live anywhere other than in the

country of which he was a part. And Julia tried to be fair about it all, especially for the potent reason that she was interested in Johnny, and inclined to resent his infatuation for the girl from Chicago.

The two girls came home with the afternoon shadows. Mrs. Johnson was in the doorway of the store, talking with Baker when they passed. She waved a greeting. Baker gazed at them, smiled, and gestured.

"The East and the West," he said.

"The least and the best," said Mrs. Johnson.

Baker naturally looked puzzled.

That evening it was talked about Solano that Johnny Trent had taken a contract to catch and break one of the wild horses of the high mesas for that Chicago girl. It was said he was to receive five hundred dollars for the animal. It was never learned who added the five hundred dollars to the facts. Yet the little monetary postscript had its influence on Frank Lopez, who was out of work and without money. He decided that he would trap and break the gray stallion and sell him to the rich lady from Chicago, and do it before Johnny Trent even came within sight of the horse. Five hundred dollars was a fortune to Lopez; and Johnny Trent was his enemy. In the cantina that evening Lopez boasted of his intent. His

compatriots encouraged him. Three of them offered to help capture the stallion.

Meanwhile Johnny had his work to do, and the weeks slipped by until the first heavy summer rain held up the road-mending for a few days. Johnny, taking advantage of the lay-off, got into his slicker and rode up to his homestead to assure himself that everything was snug against the weather and that his stock was all right. Before tackling the road work he had turned his saddle-horses to graze on the mesas, and had let the calves run with their mothers. He found everything taking care of itself. Spending the night in his cabin he left early the following morning for Solano. A day later he was back at his task again, and while he held his men faithfully to it, he had lost real interest in the road-mending. The trip to the high country had awakened his old desire for individual activity. He complained to himself that he needed exercise, and that the road work, while essential, was mighty monotonous. He longed for the day when his time would be up — when he could saddle his top-horse and, with plenty to lack and little to pack, make the ride he had been planning for weeks, which contemplated the trapping of the gray stallion in Twin Blue Cañon, breaking him, and offering him to Grace Percival in fulfillment of his promise.

Followed another week of monotonous toil, and another. The stretch of road which he had contracted to repair was now in good shape. He reported to Baker, spent an unforgettable evening with Grace Percival, and might have lingered a day or two longer in Solano had he not learned that Lopez and two or three of his kindred had recently left for the high country, presumably to capture the stallion. To let the Mexican get ahead of him was not to be thought of. Johnny, again riding toward the high country, whistled a range tune. On the rim of the cañon bordering First Mesa, he reined in and sat gazing down at the far cottonwoods and clustered adobes of Solano. He was going it alone, unaided: undertaking a task which he knew would be the hardest he had ever tackled. And for what? To please a girl whose whim it was to ride an outlaw horse, when she could have purchased the best-mannered saddle-animal in the country. But was it entirely her whim? Had he not suggested the gray stallion, himself? Johnny shook his head. He tried to recall Grace Percival as he had last seen her bidding him farewell on the moonlit road leading to Solano, for that evening she had walked with him beyond the town, and as they paused to turn back, she had implored him to give up the idea of catching the outlaw horse — to forget what she had said, and to forgive her for

her selfishness, which she now sincerely regretted. Her persuasions had been more intimate than speech, when he had stubbornly refused to give up the quest. And now, as he gazed down upon the distant town, it seemed a long time since he had said: "Grace, I'll ride back to Solano on that gray outlaw — or quit the country."

CHAPTER V

"Then there shall be wild horses running the fenceless plain,
Free as the vagrant wind that sweeps their unpossessed domain,
Studs with a strain of Arab stock, mares of the Morgan breed,
Winter and drought shall winnow them — and then for the perfect steed!"

TOWARD midnight the heavy sky cleared, swept clean by a steady drift of wind that left strips of mist along the rim of Twin Blue Cañon — mist that wavered, clung to brush and rock, and finally melted into the invisible depths, as the stars, coldly brilliant, flickered and glowed from horizon to horizon. The mesa grass, as yet short, was soggy with the recent rains. This meant easy tracking so long as the gray stallion and his mares kept to the high country. Once they knew that they were followed, they would take to the timber, but would invariably turn to the open again and again. The Twin Blue Cañon country was dotted with meadows.

Johnny's one fear was that the wild horses might break off toward the south if the chase became too hot, where the gray stallion, with his uncanny instinct for danger, would outrun the band and slip away down one of the many trackless cañons leading to the desert. Yet Johnny had determined to follow the stallion even down into The Tonto, if necessary.

Snug in his cabin on the homestead, far from Solano and Grace Percival, Johnny had opportunity to readjust himself to the isolation and freedom to which he had been accustomed. And in spite of the silence and loneliness — or perhaps because of it — he stepped back into the old, independent life with the feeling of one who shuffles into a pair of comfortable slippers after a hard day's work. And there was intimate companionship in the inanimate things about him. His rifle, hanging on the cabin wall in its worn and battered scabbard, recalled many a hunt when he actually needed fresh meat; his trout rod — a present from an Easterner who had camped at his homestead one season and had taught him the gentle art of fly-casting; his spurs, with the rowel-pins worn thin and the shanks polished by hard use; his worn gloves, his chaps — all these things recalled long rides alone in the hills, solitary camps with his pack-horse and saddle-horse; little night-fires, and the smoke-blackened skillet and coffee-pot specked with white ashes. Or the biting dust of the round-up, the smell of sweaty horses and saddle-blankets, the clatter of knives and forks as his outfit squatted near the chuck-wagon.

That the definiteness of days when he had lived and toiled and faced tense actualities should become blurred and indistinct when he allowed him-

self to think of Grace Percival — and then again, that the vision of her as that of one seen in a dream when he realized his actual surroundings — was a puzzle that he did not endeavor to solve. He recalled the tones of her voice, the expression of her eyes, the delicate perfume of her hair, and even the shape of her slender hand — but he could not recall her features distinctly. He wondered if influence reached beyond the circle of her immediate and visible presence. Johnny Trent was experiencing the romance of the unattainable. His intuition told him that that which he yearned to touch, to grasp and hold, was as silver mist on the rim of a cañon, beautiful to behold, beautiful to remember; impalpable, and most beautiful in the moment of its vanishing.

He roused himself, put wood in the stove, and then, mixing flour and water and salt, rolled out a thin dough and made tortillas on the hot stove-lids. He made tortillas because they would not crumble and break in his saddle-pockets, as bread would. He rolled the tortillas and some venison jerky in a clean flour sack. With matches and tobacco and a meat-and-bread ration that would last him three days, he was provisioned to make what he termed his first ride after the gray stallion. If unsuccessful within that time, he would trust to finding a sheep camp or shooting a wild turkey. He regretted having to take only

his six-shooter; but his rifle meant additional weight.

He fetched his saddle in from the porch, untied his slicker, and in its stead tied a spare rope back of the cantle. About two in the morning he strode out, caught up his blue roan, Pronto, and, saddling him, turned the other horses loose to run the mesas. Pronto, a big-boned, deliberate, and altogether dependable animal, stood out in front of the cabin, his ears pricked forward curiously, the reflection of the doorway light shining in his eyes. A cold wind sifted through the pines and ruffled the big roan's mane. Stars keen as diamond points sparkled in the blue-black of the summer sky. Johnny put out the fire, made things neat in the cabin, and then, drawing on his gloves, stepped out and closed the door.

He crossed the open meadow and pattered along the dim trail arched by the somber pines, until he was again in the open — the Big South Meadow where the gray stallion and his band occasionally came to graze. The cienaga in the middle of the meadow was soggy with the weight of the recent rains. Johnny circled it and bore on, toward the south. He reined up suddenly. Pronto turned his head and nickered. The bay pony, Chico, was following his old corral companion. Johnny told him, expressively, to go back. Chico stopped, just beyond rope cast.

Johnny shrugged his shoulders. The pony would soon grow tired of following when he realized the extent of the venture.

Toward the extreme end of the Big South Meadow Johnny reined up again as he heard the thud of hoofs on firmer ground. He did not know whether it was one of his own horses or some stray from Solano. "Let's go see," he said. Pronto broke into a lope. Nearing the timber Johnny heard that indescribable sound of horses bunching to run. "That's the stallion and his band — or I'm asleep." He knew the horses ahead would string out on the trail if he did not follow too close. So he held Pronto to a trot and, leaning forward, peered into the black bulk of the forest. Within the timber he dismounted, struck a match and examined the trail. Track upon track showed in the soft earth, and not a shod hoof among them. It was evident the band was headed for Turkey Springs, far to the south. Johnny left the trail and, riding west, made for the hills, planning to circle and cut the horses off from water. The recent heavy rains made good tracking, but also had filled many erstwhile dry hollows and natural rock basins where the horses could drink. Johnny was correct in surmising that the band had headed for Turkey Springs, not alone because they were followed, but through force of habit. He knew that they wat-

ered there nearly every morning. Many times when he had been riding that section of the country, he had seen their tracks fresh on the rim of the water-hole. There was the chance that the band might turn and circle back to South Meadow, especially if they were aware that he had swung west. The gray stallion had been hunted so often by men that he seemed to know just how and when to cheat them by anticipating their plans. So Johnny did not turn immediately from the foothills after he had left the timber, but kept on toward the west.

The first tinge of dawn rippled across the sparsely timbered country round Turkey Springs as Johnny topped a rise and gazed down upon the mammoth, squat junipers dotting the hidden valley. On the western side of the hills lay the desert, dim in the faint dawn. Johnny watched the morning light play on the tips of the isolated black cones of extinct volcanoes; noted the patches of greasewood, the flat dry-lake beds, the occasional abrupt ridges of tufa, the great reaches of absolutely naked sand, and all that made that sinister land a place to shun. He turned toward the east. He could barely discern the irregular rim of Sanchez Cañon. Between the cañon and his vantage of height lay Turkey Springs. To break to the desert the wild horses would have to cross Turkey Springs country. Johnny put his horse down the

long, easy slope. There were no fresh tracks near the water-hole. Johnny let Pronto drink, then lifted the saddle and recinched. He was pulling up the leather when a sound caused him to hesitate. Chico, the bay pony, appeared among the junipers. Johnny grinned. He told Chico that he was a fool horse to run after them when he might be taking his ease in some grassy meadow.

Suddenly both Chico and the blue roan raised their heads and pointed their ears. Johnny turned to see what had interested them — and in the same movement he led Pronto behind a clump of junipers. Chico followed, now close to Pronto's heels, seemingly aware that Johnny did not intend to catch him. As the two horses disappeared behind the screen of junipers, three riders drifted out into the open a half-mile east of the water-hole. Johnny had but a fleeting glimpse of them, but he surmised correctly that they were Mexicans, and that one of them was Frank Lopez, out to catch the gray stallion and make good his boast in Solano that he would have him before the change of the moon. Johnny led his horse still farther back among the junipers and, keeping under cover, rode slowly toward the western ridge. From behind a rise which concealed his horses he lay and watched the Mexicans, who came toward the water-hole, let their horses

drink, and were about to ride away when one of them gestured and called to his companions. The three dismounted and examined the fresh tracks of Johnny's two horses. A discussion followed, evident as they gesticulated and moved about as though undecided. Johnny felt relieved when they finally mounted and rode north.

Farther back in the hills Johnny hobbled Pronto in a pocket of lush grass, and, choosing a spot where the slant of the sun would reach him about an hour before noon, he took off his boots and stretched out. Almost instantly he was asleep.

He awoke with the high sun burning on the sole of his stockinged feet. He stretched, sat up, and looked to see that his horses were all right. Then he curled a cigarette and smoked. Somewhere in the country north of Turkey Springs the gray stallion was running with his band, which had not come to the water-hole that morning, possibly because Lopez was riding the country and tracking him. And Johnny was not displeased that the Mexicans had discovered the tracks of his horses. The Mexicans would argue that the tracks of two shod horses up in that country meant that two men were riding together — in other words, that Johnny Trent had a companion with him, which was exactly what Lopez concluded after reading the sign. And in view of his recent argument with

Lopez, Johnny was not averse to having the Mexican reach such a conclusion.

Johnny finally decided that Lopez had been out after the gray stallion several days, endeavoring to keep him and his band from water, and so wear them down. But the rains must have spoiled that plan. Twin Blue Cañon was the logical trap for the horses. Once aware that they were constantly followed, they would in all probability leave the mesas and take off down into the cañon, where there were water and grass. Lopez had evidently blocked them from breaking off over the range and into the desert. Otherwise he would have ridden south. Johnny Trent knew nothing about chess, but he was playing the game on a large scale.

Keeping within the timber along the foothills, he rode past meadow after meadow, alert for the appearance of the gray stallion. He reasoned that, if crowded too close, the stallion might break back alone and make for the desert. Late that afternoon Johnny came upon the tracks of several unshod horses crossing the course he had laid. He followed the tracks, which led toward the east. The horses had been running among the trees, at times scattering and then bunching again. Later he came upon the tracks of shod horses cutting diagonally into the trail — three of them, and their riders had been going fast.

"Twin Blue for sure!" murmured Johnny. Lopez and his companions had at last headed the band toward the trap.

Johnny thought that his chance was gone. Yet there was the possibility of some of the horses breaking back. But Lopez was crafty — a keen hand at the game. And any one of a hundred things might happen to prevent Lopez from getting a rope on the stallion. Johnny was not discouraged just so long as the gray stallion was free and his own horse stayed under him. He followed along, riding slowly until he reached the rim of Twin Blue Cañon. In the fading light of sunset he knelt and examined the trampled ground near the head of the cañon trail. The wild horses had evidently milled and tried to swing back from the rim, but had finally been driven into the trap. Johnny patted Pronto's muscular neck. "Don't know as we want that gray outlaw, anyway. But Lopez hasn't got his twine on him yet."

While riding that afternoon Johnny had eaten a tortilla and some jerky. He was now ravenously hungry, so he rode back from the rim to a pool of water in a rock basin. Chico followed. The horses drank. Johnny hobbled the blue roan, and then, after eating sparingly, he made a bed of pine needles — and he did not have to be sung to sleep. While riding that day he had

thought of Grace Percival. Even if he caught the gray stallion, the chances were that the horse could never be made safe for her to ride. And why had she at first seemed so anxious to have the outlaw, as against any number of excellent horses from which to choose? Yet he himself had suggested the wild horse. It was following his suggestion that she became enthusiastic, declaring that she wanted nothing in the world so much as the wild horse for her own. And she had reiterated this desire, evening after evening, until that night when she had implored him to give up the idea and return to her whether he caught the gray stallion or not. Nor could Johnny know what his failure to return would mean to her, not aware how she had sacrificed her pride in making the request.

The abrupt, rocky wall of the cañon, the huddled junipers, the pines beyond them toward the west, and the great sweep of country roundabout seemed to lift up out of the blank level of night as the invisible fires of dawn were faintly mirrored in the eastern sky. Ash-gray dawn light, shot with radiations of pallid gold, was absorbed swiftly — and the edge of the far hills lost its keen outline in a spreading pool of crimson from which burst the flaming disc of the sun. Yet no hue, no magic contour, held for long. The enchantment passed and the reality of earth

asserted itself. The early shadows of butte and pinnacle and range, hesitant and vague, grew boldly black and distinct. From somewhere back in the pines a forest bird paid shrill, sweet tribute to the recurrent wonder of the awakening day.

Johnny Trent sat up. "That means me," he said, stretching lazily as he felt the first faint warmth of the sun. Then he was on his feet. The blue roan, Pronto, was standing in a little opening warming his back. The bay pony was not in sight. Johnny caught up the roan and saddled him. Then he ate a scant ration, drank from the rock pool, and, mounting, rode over to the cañon rim. He could discern the movement of horses far below in the natural rock-walled corral where the cañon boxed. Three riders, tiny in the distance, moved across the cañon floor. As one of the riders drew away from the others, the band of wild horses, milling near the end of the cañon, suddenly broke and separated. Johnny saw the rider in advance of the others whirl his horse and swing his arm. Johnny could almost imagine he heard the hiss of the loop through the air as the cast was made. Instantly a gray horse leaped out from the others, passed the rider, and charged down the cañon. A second Lilliputian horseman swung his rope. The gray horse went to the end of it, reared backward, plunged and fought. The third rider swung in,

and his arm flickered. "Two ropes on him!" breathed Johnny. He saw the flash of the gray's belly as he turned over. He was down — captured! But before the riders could stretch him he was up, and fighting. A whirl of horses and men, a gray shape that heaved and struggled and battled with all the fury of the untamed — and like a flash a horse and rider went down. Johnny whooped joyously. The gray was putting up a mighty battle. He struck with his forefeet, and, instead of fighting back on the rope, charged his captors. Then one of the riders who had his rope on the gray stallion seemed to leap straight into the air. His horse, riderless, braced against the shock as the stallion ran past him. The rope came taut — snapped. The third man's arm swung. "Missed him!" cried Johnny. His heart was with the gray in that fierce and pitiless struggle. As Johnny gazed, his pulses drumming in his ears, he saw the stallion rear and come forward in a leap which cleared the riderless horse just as the third rider built another loop for a final, desperate cast. But the cast was never made. The stallion was past the horsemen and out of the pocket like a streak of wind-blown mist. He took the first long slope of the cañon trail on the run. The turn and the steeper succeeding grade slowed him down. Johnny's hand closed over the coiled rope at his knee. The gray

would have to pass within ten feet of him when he topped the cañon rim. Moreover, the stallion would reach the rim before he saw either horse or rider waiting. Johnny took down his rope, flipped out a loop, and reined his horse back a few feet. He was afraid that, if he crowded the wild horse too close, the gray would whirl and leap into space. Johnny sat tense, listening to the faint hoofbeats of the stallion as he came up the trail.

Then, from behind him came another sound — a voice. Johnny turned swiftly. Felipe Ortega, cousin of Lopez, was sitting a buckskin cayuse, a few paces off.

"Hello, Felipe!" called Johnny.

"Como 'sta! I look for Frank. He say to find him in these cañon, yes? I come last night from Solano." Felipe eyed the rope in Johnny Trent's hand, then reined his horse over toward the rim of the cañon and peered down. He saw the gray stallion halfway up the trail — and, below, three riders crossing the cañon floor. Felipe realized that something had happened; the gray was separated from the band, and those who followed him rode horses which he knew. The stallion, worn by his terrific fight, came slowly as he neared the top of the cliff. Felipe turned toward Johnny. "I think it is the horse my cousin would catch, yes? He break the rope."

The young Mexican's keen eyes had discerned a piece of reata trailing from the stallion's neck. Felipe had been told that his cousin would sell the horse for much money. Felipe also knew that Frank Lopez and Johnny Trent were enemies. He took down his own rope swiftly.

"What you aim to do?" queried Johnny.

"I rope him."

"You mean you'll kill him. That horse will whirl and jump clean over the edge, when he sees you. Come back from the rim! Give him a show. He just about put your outfit out of business, and I'm dinged if I'm going to sit here and see you murder him."

Johnny realized that there was also the possibility of the stallion turning on the trail and running back down into the cañon again, where three men were waiting to rope him — for should the gray turn back, Lopez would know that some one or something was blocking the upper end of the trail.

But Felipe was not to be discouraged. The horse was anybody's property — would belong to the first man who put a rope on him — and made it stick. Felipe eyed the rope in Johnny's hand. "I think you make to catch him. I think I catch him, too."

"No. I was just taking up my rope when you rode in. I figured to let him make it to the top,

and then take after him down through the timber. He'll run south, and head for the desert. But he'll just naturally jump off the edge if you swing a loop when he hits the top."

"Then he jump," declared Felipe, reining a few yards back from the rim.

"All right," said Johnny, shrugging his shoulders. Slowly he began to coil his rope. Felipe saw — and thought Johnny was through with all argument. Felipe turned to the task before him. He stood in his stirrups, his loop made, his hand moving gently to keep the loop alive and ready to flip the instant the stallion's head showed above the rim. The plod of the stallion's hoofs sounded heavier. Some twelve feet behind the Mexican, Johnny Trent sat his horse, waiting for the other to raise his arm. Unshod hoofs struck dully on the rocky trail below. The stallion was coming at a fast walk. Felipe leaned forward. His arm moved. Johnny's rope shot out, his noose settled with a hiss over the Mexican's shoulders — and Johnny whirled his own horse and started toward the timber. The gray stallion, possibly because he sniffed danger, breasted the last few yards of the steep trail on the run, his great chest flecked with foam, his eye-sockets rimmed with red, his tense nostrils working, as he heaved up to the open and thundered across the flat rock bordering Twin Blue Cañon.

Johnny slackened his rope. Felipe Ortega came to his feet cursing. Johnny laughed. "Keep your hand from your gun, hombre, or I'll blow your head off! You spoiled my throw. Now, chouse along down to Frank and tell him it'll take a real hand to put that gray man-eater down. If you got some vino rolled in your slicker, there, tell Frank to drink my health, just for luck. Vamose!"

"I tell him! An' he kill you!" cried Felipe, as he turned and limped over to his horse.

"Shucks!" And Johnny Trent coiled his rope.

CHAPTER VI

"My dam was a mustang, white and proud;
My sire was as black as a thunder-cloud;
I was foaled on the mesas cold and high,
Where the strong ones live and the weak ones die,
And the mountain lion steals!

"I knew no foe and I knew no fear,
With a milk-white mustang grazing near:
When the grass grew green in the summer sun,
I learned to dodge and I learned to run,
And I learned to use my heels!"

SULLENLY the young Mexican turned toward the cañon trail. Below, the tiny figures of horsemen moved about, as though undecided as to what course to take. Felipe surmised that they would ask him why he had let the gray stallion escape — and Felipe would have to admit that Johnny Trent had tricked him.

Meanwhile, Johnny was riding swiftly south along the rim-rock. The gray had headed toward the Turkey Springs country. Cutting diagonally through the timberland, Johnny arrived at Turkey Springs about an hour later, where he found fresh tracks in the mud round the water-hole. The stallion had paused to drink, circled the water-hole, and swung off toward the desert. Realizing that he could never overtake the stallion this side of the western hills, Johnny

filled his canteen and examined his equipment. Chico, trotting up, drank at the springs, keeping close to the blue roan as though he intended to see the game through.

With careful deliberation Johnny took up the task of tracking the gray stallion. He rode west through the dwindling junipers and into the pine timber, swung to the left and dropped down into Red Rock Cañon, and in the dry, sandy river-bed traced the course of the fugitive. He could not help but admire the persistence and courage of the gray stallion in his battle for freedom. Johnny wondered if Lopez and his kin would take up the trail of the stallion again. If they did, there was the possibility of further argument, out there on the desert. Johnny recalled the old cattleman's advice: "But the next time he comes at you — use that gun you pack under your arm." Johnny hoped there would be no necessity for that kind of argument. Moreover, Lopez would be sober, which meant that he would hesitate to crowd a handy gun too close.

Far ahead of his tracker the wild horse fled down the widening floor of the cañon and out on to the greasewood flats edging the actual desert. Visible on an occasional rise, then disappearing to blend with the color of the desert itself, the stallion swung on as though winged with light. A piece of the broken reata dangled from his

neck. Occasionally his knee would strike the reata, when it would whip forward and flick him on the nose. Then the stallion would jump sideways, shake his head, and roll his upper lip back. But he never faltered in his stride, boring straight on toward the upheaval of shattered rock and somber black crater cones that marked the edge of the bad-lands. As yet, Johnny had not seen him. The wild horse had disappeared within the maze of shimmering spires, squat buttes, and malpai ridges, long before Johnny rode out of the narrow, winding cañon at an easy trot, followed by the bay pony Chico, a self-elected member of the enterprise. Somewhere in the bad-lands was a spring of clear, cold water. Johnny had heard old-timers talk about it, describing with slow emphasis the peculiarities of the volcanic cone in which it was hidden. The crater itself, so he had been told, was lined with loose cinder clear to the bottom, which was flat, covered with fine sand, and some three hundred yards in circumference. The spring seeped from a crevice in the western side of the crater, dripping into a smooth, shallow basin of rock shielded from the sun by a freakish arch of red lava. It was said the spring had been discovered by an old prospector, who, perishing of thirst, had climbed the cone to look for some landmark of hope, and had blindly stumbled upon the hidden water. Searchers had

finally trailed him, found the skeleton of a burro near the outside edge of the cone, and with the precaution of strung reatas had descended into the crater where they discovered the bones of the prospector near the spring. He had apparently been unable to climb the steep, cinder-covered sides of the crater. In fact, the searchers, even with the help of reatas, had found it difficult to gain the top on account of the shifting, loose cinders that slid down upon them at each step. Johnny recalled the story as he jogged along, keeping an eye on the tracks of the stallion. He had heard many such tales which he had discounted liberally, aware of the fondness of many old-timers for creating romance out of materials that, if exposed to the actual light of investigation, would fade swiftly. Several natives of Solano had told of the hidden spring, but, when questioned, admitted that they did not know in which of the extinct volcano craters it was to be found.

Waves of heat buffeted horse and rider as they left the greasewood flats and struck into the actual desert. Toward noon the sun hammered hard, but the refraction of heat and light from the glaring sand was even worse. Johnny allowed himself a taste of water from his canteen. Now at a walk, now at a trot, he followed the evenly spaced tracks of the gray stallion. And

because the horse might finally circle back to the mesas, Johnny kept a vigilant eye on the open reaches toward the north. Hour after hour he slipped along, riding with his shadow; followed persistently by the bay pony to which he now paid no attention whatever. Grudgingly the sun rounded toward the horizon. At about four o'clock the heat seemed to concentrate, sweeping across the rustling sand in billows that seared like the blast from an open furnace. Before he realized it, Johnny was among the scattered buttes and pinnacles that dotted the great, hill-girdled basin of the desert. He counted seven cones so similar in contour and size that they seemed as though made from the same gigantic mould. The stallion's tracks bore on toward the west.

Johnny passed the first black, mountainous cone, which, owing to its steepness and symmetry, seemed much higher than it really was. He passed the second. Here the tracks of the stallion swerved toward the north.

Rounding the base of the third cone, Johnny paused in the scant shade of its northern side. The stallion's tracks held close to the base of the crater, finally disappearing on a slant of smooth, caked lava which spread in black undulations toward the outlying level of sand. Intent on the tracks, Johnny did not at first realize why Pronto and the bay pony had stopped and were

both looking at the peak above. He glanced up. On the rim of the crater, outlined like a cameo against the turquoise sky, stood the gray stallion, his neck arched, his muscular body poised in challenging surprise. Johnny was lost in sheer admiration for the intrepid animal. The sides of the volcanic cone were steep — in places treacherously smooth, in others equally treacherous in broken and jagged tufa. That any horse should attempt to climb that height! And why had the horse made that mighty effort, instead of bearing on, off toward the north and the mesas? Johnny was puzzled. He could not believe that the wild horse had deliberately chosen the peak as a refuge from pursuit.

Pronto and Chico, with pricked ears and heads lifted, gazed at the silhouette above them. Immobile as the black hill itself, the gray stallion stood with nostrils belled, his muscles tense, poised as though carven from dull silver. Johnny's heart thumped heavily. His throat constricted. If the wild horse should start down the outside of the cone, Johnny knew that he could head him and rope him before he got out on to the sand. As Johnny gazed, the gray stallion whirled and lunged from sight.

"His grave was waiting for him," whispered Johnny.

He tied Pronto to a ragged chunk of rock and

slowly climbed the dangerous steep of the great cone. On the rim he paused to get his breath. He glanced into the crater, whistled his surprise, and then sat down, rolled a cigarette and smoked. The gray stallion was circling the level, sand-strewn floor of the crater as though searching for a way out. Across from where Johnny sat, and some sixty feet below, a freakish red arch sprang from the western wall near its base. "Did he know there was water down there?" murmured Johnny, almost willing to believe anything possible.

Yet he soon turned to the practical, estimating the distance from the rim to the bottom, the steepness of the funnel-like sides, the circumference of the sandy bottom itself, and the possibility of getting out again, should he decide to venture into the trap and make a last desperate effort to capture the stallion. He concluded that there was one slim chance in a hundred that the stallion could be saved; for the problem was not one of getting down into the trap, but of getting out again. The funnel of the cone was lined with fine cinders that rustled down at the slightest touch. Even now the tracks where the stallion had lunged down into the trap were disappearing as the cinders whispered in slow movement. If the wild horse were left in the pit, he would starve. "And it was me drove you into this,"

said Johnny. "It's up to me to save you, even if you give me the slip in the wind-up." And Johnny thought of Grace Percival and his promise to her — but that was insignificant, now. For Johnny was fundamentally unselfish and appreciated a fine animal for the thing it was rather than for its usefulness to man. Primarily he had intended capturing the stallion, breaking him, and presenting him to Grace Percival to please her, to gain her favor. He was through with that idea.

To Johnny the task of liberating the stallion seemed more like a civil engineer's job than a cowpuncher's. He surveyed the rim of the crater, encircled by huge fragments of tufa, some of them too massive to move with anything less powerful than dynamite.

Rising he stepped to a block of tufa which seemed balanced on the rim. He put his shoulder to it, but it did not budge. He dug the smaller fragments away from its lower side, realizing the risk he ran if the fragment toppled suddenly. Finally the chunk toppled over and slid, drawing after it a rushing stream of cinders which banked up at the bottom, all but burying the chunk itself. The gray stallion, terrified by the descending mass, lunged up the opposite slope a few yards, struggled knee-deep in the treacherous, shifting trail, and finally turned and ploughed his

way down to the bottom. Johnny loosed another huge fragment. A fine stream of loose cinders followed it, banked up against it, ceased to move. He did not cheat himself into the belief that he was building a feasible trail; but he did believe that the sliding chunks would finally strip the loose cinders from the coarser foundation beneath. Fragment after fragment he moved, toiling until his glove-fingers wore through as he dug down beneath the base of each fragment. Presently one huge chunk rolled to the bottom — significant, in that it did not slide. The loose cinder was being worn away in a narrow strip down the side of the funnel. Yet even as Johnny paused and congratulated himself that he was engineering a way down — and, possibly, up again — the sides of the trench melted and ran into the channel. Still, a shallow depression remained as evidence that he had made some headway toward firm footing on the treacherous cinder-slide.

He mopped the grimy sweat from his face and went at it again. Finally he took to carrying smaller chunks and rolling them down the trench, until he had built something that looked like a series of steps from the rim to the crater floor. Meanwhile, the gray stallion, having exhausted himself in trying to climb the opposite slope, retreated toward the red arch of lava and

there he watched his natural enemy toil at an incomprehensible task in a thin haze of cinder dust. Johnny ceased working, to survey the bottom of the crater more carefully. He noted the red arch — and again he recalled the story of the lost prospector and the hidden water. He could not believe it possible that he had stumbled upon the secret — yet the stallion had passed two crater cones and had ascended the third.

Returning to his horses, Johnny drank from the canteen, fortified himself with food, and, taking his two ropes, reascended the cone. Fastening one rope to a block of lava, he worked his way down the improvised trail, testing it step by step. Coming to the end of the first rope, he knotted it to the other. He had barely set foot on the sandy floor of the crater when the stallion charged. Johnny leaped up on the pile of tufa. The gray stallion swerved and ran to the opposite side of the enclosure. Johnny estimated the distance to the red lava arch, stepped down to the sand, and began to walk toward it, keeping a cautious eye on the stallion. The big gray watched him, then suddenly laid back his ears, and with teeth bared charged again. Johnny ran for it, and slipped behind the low arch a second before the stallion swept past. Each time Johnny showed himself, the wild horse made for him. Finally Johnny retreated beneath the arch

and, with considerable curiosity, examined the shallow rocky basin at the farther side. A thin trickle of water kept the natural hollow about half filled. There was no outlet. Evaporation maintained what seemed to be an unvarying level. The water was cool and tasted of sulphur. The air beneath the arch was comparatively cool. Beyond, the crater was a pocket of stagnant heat. Shadows slipped across the bottom of the crater, leaving a scant quarter of its sand-strewn surface in the sunlight. The wild horse trotted round the base of the funnel, stopped and sniffed at Johnny's tracks in the sand, and seemed inclined to try the trail down which Johnny had come, yet he hesitated. "Afraid of the rope," thought Johnny. Then, without other urge than sheer impulse, he whipped out his gun and fired a shot into the air. At the crash of the explosion, the stallion leaped straight for the pile of tufa, clawed over it like a cat, and, with his great haunches heaving, lunged up the slope and vanished over the rim. Johnny was up and running across the sand. He labored up the slope, his chest heaving, his mouth set in a hard grin.

From the crest he saw the stallion plunge and slip and slide to the desert floor — heard him whistle a challenge to the two horses, and then with head up and tail out strike into a smooth run. The bay pony, Chico, circling, finally took

after the stallion. Johnny laughed. Then he turned, and, drawing up his ropes, coiled them separately.

Early dusk filled the crater. The desert sky was faintly pricked with stars. Johnny sat down and smoked, gazing out across the dim reaches. He had accomplished nothing — and yet he felt rather satisfied with the result of his day's work. The wild horse had headed north. And as long as Johnny had been able to see him, he had not swerved toward the high mesas. There was nothing to do but ride back to the Turkey Springs country, where Pronto could rest and graze, and then take up the trail in the morning. Johnny grinned as he recalled how the pony Chico had taken after the gray stallion.

"Well," he observed, as he rose, and began to descend the cone, "some folks like 'em wild."

CHAPTER VII

ARIZONA

"You step from the saddle, too tired to eat,
You hobble your horse, and then,
You drift into slumber dreamless, sweet,
Nor care if you rise again,

"Till the dawn discovers a brand-new day,
And the dawn-wind tunes a reed,
Then it's song, and saddle, and on your way,
Wherever the trail may lead."

JOHNNY TRENT, however, delayed long enough to eat, and drink from the ice-cold spring — and wish that he had some hot coffee. A thin, chill wind whispered among the junipers round Turkey Springs, a wind that inclined him to step briskly as he sought Pronto and led him down to the water-hole. Chico, that ambitious young renegade who had evidently thrown in with the gray stallion, deserting his old corral companion Pronto without even a neigh of explanation, had not returned during the night. Johnny was rather pleased about it than otherwise. Chico might possibly keep somewhere in the neighborhood of the stallion for a day or so, unless the wild horse turned on him and fought him off. Moreover, two horses were easier to track than one — and Chico was shod and could be tracked across rocky ground, while the wild

horse would be difficult to track across the rocks. So Johnny reasoned, which makes it obvious that he had not given up his intention of capturing the gray stallion. Many reasons might be advanced as to why Johnny had changed his mind. Yet the pertinent reason and urge sprang from the fact that there was nothing else to do, unless he threw up his hands and admitted that the undertaking had been too much for him. When he told Grace Percival that he would either return with the gray stallion or not return at all, he meant it. Then, Lopez and his kin were out after the wild horse. If Lopez captured him and fetched him into town, Johnny knew that his own reputation would be dimmed even if not obliterated; and as a rider of "salty ones" Johnny had not yet been obliged to hand his spurs to any man.

"Just naturally got to trail that Chico horse and head him back to his own range," was Johnny's concession to his conscience which hinted that he had yesterday given up the idea of capturing the gray. It did not bother Johnny that his conscience further hinted that trailing Chico was an insipid excuse to take after the stallion again. So, saddling Pronto, Johnny stepped up and reined toward the desert. Crossing the range diagonally, he cut into the stallion's trail far north of the crater cones. Chico had been following the stallion, evident in that the bay pony's tracks fre-

quently covered those of the wild horse. Hour after hour Johnny followed the plain trail, which crossed arroyos, swung past buttes, grew dim on the malpai, and showed strong and clear again in the sand. Presently the tracks indicated that Chico had come up with the stallion, and that the stallion had turned, evidently to drive him off, for Chico's tracks swerved circumspectly in a wide arc, yet still bore on toward the north.

About noon, Johnny, who had been following at an easy trot, reined in toward the foothills looking for water. Happening to glance back, he noticed a tiny cloud of dust on the southern horizon. The light desert breeze was from the west; yet the dust cloud forged ahead persistently, coming up out of the south, near the craters. Johnny kept his horse moving toward the foothills. He trailed up a wash littered with dead trees and mud-encrusted branches half-buried in the coarse gravel and sand. Where the wash narrowed and deepened to a miniature cañon, he found water back of a wedge-like boulder; and in the moist sand bordering the pool, the unmistakable tracks of his pony Chico and those of an unshod horse. "Over the hills and home," said Johnny as he cooled Pronto before letting him drink. For the tracks of the two horses led on, up the cañon, nor was there any indication that they had turned back toward the desert.

Once more in the saddle, Johnny worked on up the rugged stream-bed till he came to a sloping cutbank of red clay. Diagonally across the cutbank ran the tracks, where the horses had climbed up and out. Johnny took it easy, fearing to trail them too close and so turn the gray back to the desert again. An occasional bunch of freshly nipped grass showed that the horses were hungry, and grazing as they moved on up the slope of the range. Occasionally Pronto sniffed the tracks; and once where the horses had turned and had struck up the slope at another angle, Pronto stopped and twitched his ears toward the desert. Far south, and far below, four horsemen swung along toward the north, Lilliputian riders on a vast, barren floor of sand and scattered rock. "Those fellows will learn to ride, if they keep on practicing," Johnny observed confidentially to a lone piñon. Within the hour he was on the crest, in the timber. The gray and his running mate had headed back toward the high mesas.

The lone pine on the edge of Big South Meadow cast a three o'clock shadow when Johnny pushed out from the timber and surveyed the green emptiness of sod-grass girdled by the austere and silent forest. Out toward the middle of the meadow the short grass twinkled and quivered as the breeze touched it. Mellowed by distance, yet distinct and silver-shrill came the neigh of a horse.

"And the breeze blowing from me right straight toward him," said Johnny. He reined round, rode back into the timber, then circled the meadow, screened by the trunks of the somber pines. As he approached the east side of the meadow, Pronto fretted and tossed his head. Johnny grinned. He pulled up. The blue roan quivered with excitement, although there was nothing to be seen save the red trunks of the trees and the shadowy aisles of the timberlands. Without any apparent reason for it, Johnny dismounted and pulled up the slackened cinch. As he swung to the saddle again he heard a faint crash in the distance. The blue roan jumped as though he had been struck with a quirt. "Trying to pull off a ghost dance, or something?" said Johnny, holding the roan's head in. Yet Johnny's own casual attitude was not altogether sincere. He had the peculiar feeling of one about to experience a surprise. It came — with a rush and a rip and the dull thunder of hoofs. A shadow swept past a distant tree-trunk — then another shadow, of a different color. He saw a lithe gray shape leap as though to clear a fallen tree — and then horse after horse burst from the edge of the timber into the sunlit meadow, swept halfway across it, crowded together, turned and milled like a brown whirlpool, their flickering manes and tails whipping up like wind-tossed foam. And in their

midst the great gray stallion reared and struck and squealed like a demon-horse. "Ghost dance! I said it!" muttered Johnny as he took down his rope. The quivering blue roan leaped to the spur. Johnny's loop was up and going. His teeth were clenched, his lips set in a hard line. He swayed to the lunge of his horse as it tore across the level mesa. The milling band broke as though against a rock. Their second of indecision was Johnny Trent's unanticipated vantage. The gray stallion fought to break through his frenzied mates. Chico, seemingly as wild as the wildest, blundered into him, went down with a flash of belly and threshing feet. The singing loop swept out like a live thing borne up by wings. The stallion leaped over the fallen horse, the upper edge of the loop struck the gray's nose, twitched down, and both forelegs shot into the diminishing noose. Johnny, stifling a groan, jerked his right arm high. His hand flashed to the horn of the saddle —a lightning swift dally, and the gray turned over in the air as Pronto braced himself for the shock.

Stunned, the gray stallion lay where he had fallen. Johnny untied his spare rope, dismounted swiftly, and, running to the gray, hog-tied him. At first, Johnny thought the stallion's neck was broken: but finally the wild horse raised his head and struggled to rise. The bay pony, Chico, jarred by his own fall, seemed to have given up

all idea of running wild. He stood dejectedly watching Johnny, who in turn stood watching the fallen horse. Pronto, with a wary eye on the stallion, kept the rope taut. Finally Johnny cast it off. He had captured the wild horse, had him down, hog-tied; and largely because luck had sent the pony Chico blundering into the gray when the latter had dodged the loop. The actual capture had been almost too easy. Yet Johnny knew only too well that the real battle was still in the future, provided he was able to get the wild horse into a corral at all. With one man to help, it would not be such a difficult task. But alone, unaided, there was the ever-present chance that luck might switch to the other side of the mesa — or table if you wish — and substitute, in a single twist, a broken leg, neck, collar-bone, arm, or other essential for a captive gray stallion, now down and beating his head on the meadow sod as he struggled to rise. The hazard of physical injury did not bother Johnny Trent. But the thought of losing the stallion did. Lopez and his kindred were somewhere in the high country, undoubtedly alert for any slip on Johnny's part that would favor them. And that was fair enough. "Might as well try to bottle a streak of lightning with a teaspoon," soliloquized Johnny. "The gray is gaunt: he ain't had much chance to eat lately."

The long shadows of the tall pines slanted down across the western edge of the meadow. Pronto and Chico grazed placidly, side by side. Johnny, with a coiled rope in his hand, sat gazing at the gray stallion.

He elected himself chairman of the committee on ways and means, and studied the situation. If he could manage to get a saddle on the wild horse, and should then try to ride him down, there on the meadow, the stallion would undoubtedly pitch straight for the timber. Johnny visualized himself hanging by his belt from a high branch, a warning to all aspiring bronco-twisters. No, it wouldn't do to risk riding him down in the meadow. It was a spacious corral and the ground was not hard, but the posts were too far apart. Johnny still had some water in his canteen and enough food for a meal. And in thinking of food, he thought of his cabin, and how he would enjoy a cup of strong, hot coffee. He could make it to the cabin and back in an hour. He had decided to keep the stallion hogtied and down until daybreak, next morning. Yes, he would risk a trip to his cabin to get some fresh supplies. A good idea! Then, happening to glance toward the western rim of the meadow, he noticed something moving back in the timber. Presently he caught the glimmer of steel, or silver. A little later four horsemen pushed out from

the timber, reining up as they saw him. No, the trip to the cabin was not a good idea. Wouldn't Lopez and his friends have been in luck if they had arrived just a few minutes later and found the wild horse down and tied — just like a Christmas present!

Johnny, still sitting cross-legged, reached back and drew his six-shooter from the holster. He laid the gun on the sod in front of him, and placed his hat over it. Then, to occupy his hands he made a cigarette, slowly, and with his eyes fixed on the riders, who, after a brief consultation, rode toward him. Presently they saw the gray stallion — and then they understood. Johnny Trent had captured the horse, but could get no further with the job. Frank Lopez headed the cavalcade, his black eyes wary and his right hand on his thigh.

The Mexicans pulled up a few yards from the captive horse. They evidently expected Johnny to say something, but he merely nodded, and smoked.

"You think you pretty smart," said Lopez finally.

"I sure do!"

There was no chance for an argument there. "I put two reata on those horse before you catch him," declared Lopez.

"I don't see any rawhide on him," said Johnny.

Lopez communed with his fellows, then turned to the alert cowpuncher, who smoked his cigarette lazily. "I have those gray horse trap, and he go." And Lopez gestured toward young Felipe, who nodded.

"Where did you go?" queried Johnny, addressing Felipe.

"I mean those horse!" cried Lopez.

"That's all right," observed Johnny languidly. And languidly Johnny gestured toward the stallion. "He's mine. Look at him as long as you like. It won't cost you anything."

Lopez said something to the Mexican nearest him, then addressed Johnny. "Mebby you sell those horse, yes?" But Johnny was watching the man on Lopez's left. And that swarthy gentleman was slyly taking down his rope. Johnny saw through the scheme in a flash. They intended to ride round him before he realized what was up, get a rope on him and probably tie him to a convenient tree from whence he could watch them make away with his captive. Johnny didn't quite fancy the idea. It wasn't so much a matter of losing the horse, either: but a matter of racial pride. He knew that he must not blunder, or make one false move. He did not intend to kill or be killed: yet he did not intend to be backed down by these men just so long as he could see to shoot. And it was this determination, subtly

transmitted to the Mexicans, that averted a real tragedy. Had they thought that Johnny Trent was bluffing, they might have tried him out. As it was, Johnny reached for his hat — a most natural thing to do, as the low sun was now shining in his eyes. He came to his feet with his hat in one hand and his six-shooter in the other. "Take your hand off that reata!" he said. Then quietly to Lopez. "Frank, if one of you try to ride round me, or put a hand on that horse, I'll kill you — and get that man next."

The low sunlight shone softly on the group — the four swarthy horsemen of Solano, each an individual statue of instant attention and immobility: the Mexican on Lopez's left with his rope in his hand, the young Felipe, sitting his horse with unnatural rigidity, and watching his cousin's face; Lopez and the little, old weazened Anastacio both gazing at Johnny Trent's right hand, at the hammer of the six-shooter cocked like the head of a snake before it strikes. Between them and the keen-eyed young cowpuncher lay the great gray stallion, feet bunched and tied, flank-muscles twitching, and his head half-raised from the meadow grass. Beyond, Chico and the blue roan grazed quietly, as though the argument were none of their affair, but supper was.

Frank Lopez did some mental arithmetic, having in mind that Johnny Trent was somewhat of

a lightning calculator himself. Lopez wisely decided that the stallion was not worth a gun-fight and the inevitable results — killing, outlawry, and more killing. "I think those horse he kill you, sometime," said Lopez. He had to say something to save his face and maintain some kind of prestige. But Rico, he with the rope in his hand holding it as though waiting for some one to tell him what to do next, was not altogether pleased with the situation. "Dare principio!" he muttered. But old Anastacio spoke. "We will make the camp, here — and wait."

"Great idea!" declared Johnny.

CHAPTER VIII

"I'm afoot, and you're mounted on a fast one," said Buck to the horsethief. "But I've got a Colt that can outrun anything that wears legs. Yes, you're looking at him, right now. How do you like his eye?" (From "Buck Yardlaw's Ride.")

THE smoke of their fire drifted across the meadow from the edge of the timber. Mingled with the smoke came the subtle fragrance of coffee, and the more pronounced aroma of meat, cooking. Johnny had hobbled Pronto, and had a small fire of his own going, both for warmth, and light, which would discover any one coming within a too familiar proximity to the captive stallion. While he did not anticipate any trouble, he was not taking any chances. He had dragged several fallen limbs to the fire — enough fuel to last through the night. Lopez, old Anastacio, Rico, and the young Felipe were waiting, comfortably encamped beneath the sheltering branches of a low spruce. And Johnny was only too well aware of what they waited for — the possibility of the stallion breaking loose, through some slip or miscalculation; and if he did manage to saddle and mount him, in the morning, there was always the sprightly possibility of getting pitched and left holding on to the world while the wild horse spread its wings and floated off into

space, or into the ready loops of Lopez and his kindred. Johnny knew that his only chance was to keep the stallion down and tied, and without food or water for the next eight or ten hours. This would weaken him and tame him to some extent. Nevertheless, Johnny realized that he would have to ride, and ride hard, any time he mounted the gray. Johnny dried his saddle-blanket by the fire and then put it round his shoulders. Light from the other fire flickered up the trunks of the pines and spruce across the meadow. He could hear the Mexicans chattering, and occasionally caught the drift of their talk, which was about the gray stallion, and himself. Once he was amused to hear Rico tell Lopez that he (Johnny) was a horsethief. Rico was vehement, and talked loud.

The first few hours of his vigil were not so bad. Toward midnight, however, Johnny fought a heavy desire to sleep. He poked the fire and moved around, toasted some jerky and ate it, smoked, and tried, as he had often done of late, to recall Grace Percival's face clearly. But always the features would blur in his vision, and while he knew exactly how she looked, he could not visualize her. This puzzled him. He could visualize Mrs. Johnson, or Julia Baker, or any of the Solano folk. "Mebby I think I know what she looks like, but don't," he soliloquized. "I've

seen many a mirage, and I always knew 'em for what they were. And I've rode over to where they ought to be, and they weren't there. But she's there, waiting. And I'm here, waiting. And Lopez is over there —"

Johnny straightened his shoulders and turned his head. The sound of hoofs moving steadily came softly across the starlit meadow. Johnny poked the fire and threw on a piece of a pine branch. The flame danced up. The men over in Lopez's camp had ceased talking.

A soft, drawling voice announced that it was Wetherill. Johnny was up and blinking into the darkness. A horse's head poked into the circle of light. "That you, Trent?" said the voice. Then the rider became visible — the lean, slow-speaking Texan, up from the supervisor's office at Solano, and evidently on his way to the San Carlos reservation: ranger Wetherill, poking along in his easy way, never surprised at anything, and seldom *by* anything: a man who, in gathering information, used his ears rather than his voice. Johnny and the ranger had met aforetime as competitors in a pistol match, at a local barbecue. The Texan had won by so narrow a margin that he would not take the prize — nor would Johnny Trent. So they compromised by presenting it to a third competitor who had done some excellent work with a borrowed gun. Moreover, the third

man was married and they felt sorry for him — so they said. Consequently Wetherill and Johnny foregathered on the stamping-ground of single blessedness and mutual respect.

The ranger walked round the captive stallion, glanced across the meadow toward the camp-fire under the trees. Having heard in Solano that both Lopez and Trent were out after the wild horse, he stepped over to his own pack-animal and threw off the hitch. He spread his bed-roll near the fire, hobbled both horses, and, returning with his saddle, made himself comfortable.

"How did you happen to get your twine on him?" he queried, and Johnny appreciated the compliment implied by Silent Wetherill's question.

"You said it! It just happened. I was lucky, just like in our shooting-match last year." And Johnny told him briefly, with interspaces of silence, comprehensively expressive: as in the conclusion of his sketch — "And then Frank Lopez tried to run a whizzer on me, but I said 'No.' Frank and his bunch are over there . . ." Johnny gestured.

Wetherill pulled off his boots. "I'd just naturally hate to see you lose him — now." The ranger kicked off his overalls. "This old tarp is wide enough to sleep two." He yawned, crawled in, wound his watch, and placed it with his six-

shooter in his hat. "I saw a hoss, just like him, once, down along the Rio Grande, and a Mexican wanted him a whole lot. I rode that hoss quite a spell afterwards, but he always was a little gun-shy."

Johnny grinned and pulled off *his* boots. The tiny fire flickered and died down. It was so still that Johnny could hear the ranger's watch tick. Johnny stretched, pulled the edge of the tarp over his ear — and then he was gazing at a slant of sunlight on the meadow grass. He had slept four hours.

CHAPTER IX

"The wild horse fought for his right to roam
On the mesas far and still:
Crimson flecks in the clotted foam
That danced in the sun as they hazed him home,
Over hollow land and hill.

"They have bound his neck with the searing rope,
They have ridged his sweating side,
Roweled from flank to shoulder-slope,
Yet courage nor skill nor strength may hope
To conquer his crested pride."

WITHOUT oral preliminaries, Johnny Trent and Wetherill went at it. Lopez and his disgruntled companions watched, sitting their horses near the edge of the morning meadow. Wetherill dropped a loop over the stallion's neck, while Johnny cautiously loosed the hog-tie. As the gray horse came up, Wetherill spurred round him. The taut rope swept the stallion's legs from under him. The stallion fell hard; came up again, trembling. Johnny heeled him. If the wild horse had not been worn down by hunger and lack of water, he would have fought until his heart burst in a frenzy of rage. But he was growing weak, and his nerve was shaken. Yet he reared in a mighty effort to break free from the searing rope that was choking him. Johnny turned his horse and jerked the stallion's legs from under him.

Again the stallion heaved himself up and started toward the timber. "Let him come," said Wetherill. Johnny allowed the captive to kick free from his loop, and, building another as all three horses swept toward the trees, rode close. As the stallion went past a tree on one side, Wetherill spurred by on the other. The rope came taut with a twang like a fiddle-string. The stallion was whipped round, facing the tree. Johnny dashed in behind him and struck his flanks. Wetherill took in the slack as the wild horse forged ahead. The ranger was out of the saddle and had a turn round the tree before the rope came taut again. Together the ranger and Johnny snubbed him up close, fighting for every inch of rope. Finally the stallion was choked down and saddled. He was let up — and Johnny was in the saddle. Yet, contrary to the expectations of those who watched, the gray horse did not pitch, but broke into a run, heading for the timber on the opposite side of the meadow. Wetherill turned him, and, riding with his loop ready, hazed him along.

Out in the sunlit meadow they had just left, Lopez watched the blue roan, Pronto, roll, get up and shake himself, and then philosophically take to grazing while Chico grazed alongside.

Lopez shrugged his shoulders. "Next time," he told his companions, "that gray horse will

fight until he kills himself, or the man that rides him. Then it is that I get him. Felipe, you will ride to Solano and bring back food. There is no brand on that gray horse — yet."

Johnny and Wetherill were surprised when the stallion walked sullenly into the corral at Johnny's place.

Wetherell shook his head. "I'd rather see him fight, right now, than act like he does. What you aim to do with him, anyhow?"

"Oh, just sit and look at him. I like the way he is built."

"So do I. But you'll never make a horse of him."

"Mebby not. But speaking of horses, what do you say if I make some coffee?"

"You might do worse."

"Yes — and I'm sorry I haven't got anything worse, even for snake-bites. But the next time we meet up in town it will be different."

"Mebby so," drawled Wetherill, "if you keep on monkeying with that outlaw hoss. Look at him. Would you say he is all unwound yet?"

"Nope! He's just resting himself up for the next dance. Let's eat."

After breakfast, Johnny caught up his old pack-horse which never grazed far from the cabin, and rode with Wetherill back to the Big South Meadow, where he bid farewell to the ranger and

then hazed Pronto and Chico back to his homestead. He turned them into the pasture lot, left a bucket of water in the corral for the stallion, and, as the sun struck hot on the cabin roof, he fell asleep on his bed. He lay limp and utterly spent, every line of his body expressive of exhaustion. Flies buzzed in the open doorway and on the window-panes. The sun mounted to noon. The short, intense shadows swung slowly toward the east. Johnny slept throughout the long afternoon, nor did the chill of evening awaken him. Sleep was generously restoring his worn energies, building him up to his normal strength again. Stars flickered, grew bright, and waned, and still he slept. The first cold, hard light of dawn was edged with gold which spread swiftly to the tall tops of the silent pines, slid across the faint green of the rain-freshened grass, burned ruddy on the red boles of the trees, and was reflected in the glowing eyes of the gray stallion, a silver statue in the stake corral, his slim ears pricked forward, his whole being intent upon the two horses that grazed so placidly in the pasture. They were of his kind but not of his kin. The stallion stamped, switched his long tail, tossed his head. Relieved of the binding cinch, free from the fear of the stinging rowels — for Johnny had not spared the iron during his ride down the mesas — the wild horse resented his imprisonment, resented the

memory of his capture, and, although his flanks were drawn from lack of food, the lusty pride of the wild stood out in every muscle, every curve of his splendid body.

Had some one fired a gun within fifty yards of the cabin, it is doubtful if Johnny would have been disturbed by the sound. But when the captive stallion whistled shrilly and lunged round the corral with sudden, fierce energy, Johnny stirred and muttered. Again the shrill challenge of the stallion. Johnny sat up, almost mechanically, at first not wholly conscious of what had wakened him. Then he recalled the happenings of the past few days — a vague, nightmarish panorama of cañons, meadows, timberland, dead-black cones of extinct volcanoes, wild horses in flight — and finally *the* horse, captured, secure in the corral — and, down in Solano, Grace Percival was waiting, wondering, perhaps, when he would return. Johnny stretched, and, as though his uplifted hands had caught hold of some invisible object, he pulled himself to his feet. Turning, he gazed through the south window of the cabin. His sleep-heavy eyes realized the back and shoulders of the gray stallion, and his gaze followed the line of his pricked ears. Four horsemen were crossing the pasture. Johnny rubbed his eyes and stared again. He recognized the riders as Frank Lopez and his kin.

Johnny's gun had slipped from the holster. He picked it up, glanced at the cylinder, and holstered it. He stepped to the water-bucket and drank greedily of the stale water. He felt numb, all but powerless to drag himself back to the window again. He broke the tip from a dried chili and chewed the stinging seeds. Slowly the blood crept back into his heavy pulses. A wave of heat ran up the back of his neck. He was not hungry, but he felt the dull ache of an empty stomach. He spat out the seeds. Lopez and his companions were heading straight for the corral. Johnny reasoned that having seen no smoke they had taken it for granted that he was away. He waited until the Mexicans were within a few yards of the corral — thus tentatively establishing their purpose in trespassing on the homestead — then he picked up the water-bucket and sauntered out. The riders were discussing the gray stallion. They ceased suddenly, surprised into silence.

"'Morning, Frank?" said Johnny. "What can I do for you?"

Lopez mumbled something to his companions — then stepped his horse forward. "You steal that caballo from me, I think yes."

"Steal your grandmother! I trapped him out on the desert and turned him back to the meadow and roped him. You know the rest."

"I rope him first!" declared Lopez, gesturing excitedly.

"Mebby-so, Frank. But I got him."

"I ride five day" — Lopez spread his fingers — "all over those mesa for that caballo. I run him in the cañon and rope him. He break the rope — two time. Then it is that you stop Felipe when he make to catch him. I guess I don' like that."

"Frank," said Johnny, endeavoring to keep his temper, "we had it out, once before, when you were drunk. If you'd been sober there wouldn't have been any scrap. Don't forget that two or three folks saw you come at me with a knife — and they won't forget it if they hear we locked horns again. Now I don't like the way you and your bunch rode into my pasture without an invitation. I caught the stallion and I'm going to keep him. You know where the gate is — and just fasten it when you go out."

"You steal my job — then you steal those caballo —"

"Just a minute. That talk don't go, old-timer. Liquor stole your job; not me. I told you once to vamose. Now I tell you again. And to make it legal — get off this ranch and keep off. I have warned you three times, Frank. I'm done."

The Mexican's face turned a mottled red.

"You say I don' get those caballo? Then *you* don' get him!" Lopez, enraged, jerked out his gun, intending to shoot the stallion down. But Johnny, recalling in a flash their former quarrel, read other and more sinister intent. He swung his arm. The empty water-bucket whirled through the air and took Lopez square on the head. He reeled, clutched the saddle-horn, and as his horse, startled by the sudden activity, whirled to run, he fired at Johnny. The shot was wild, but by chance it grazed Johnny's ribs, searing like a white-hot iron.

With the snap of his hand Johnny pulled and fired. Lopez dropped from his horse and sprawled on the trampled ground. Lopez's kindred hesitated, yelled, and then spurred scattering toward the distant gateway. Johnny stared at the gun in his hand, shrugged his shoulders, put his hand to his side, and walked slowly over to where Lopez lay, face down and still. Johnny had shot to take Lopez between the shoulders, and he thought he had killed him. But the shot had gone high and had torn the big muscle from the side of the Mexican's neck. Johnny stooped, examined the wounded man, saw that the shot had missed the spine by a scant two inches. Lopez was bleeding so much that Johnny roughly bandaged the wound and then went to the spring for water. He would need water — and plenty of

it. None of Lopez's kin had returned when Johnny came back with the water. He carried the wounded man into the cabin and stanched the flow of blood as best he could. While working over the half-conscious Mexican, Johnny silently congratulated himself because of the swift intervention of Chance that had left Frank Lopez a live man with a superficial bullet wound, instead of an exceedingly dead one with a shattered spine: for the very good reason that Johnny did not care to bear the reputation of a killer and eventually be forced to ride with his gun ready every time one of Lopez's kin showed up on the sky-line.

The wounded man made as comfortable as possible, Johnny prepared a much-needed breakfast. He planned to ride down to Solano and get a doctor. He had cleared away the breakfast things and was about ready to leave when Lopez gestured feebly.

"Want a drink?" queried Johnny.

Lopez beckoned Johnny to come nearer. "I think it is that I make the mistake, yes?" whispered Lopez.

"Kind of looks like it."

"You go to Solano?"

"Yes. You need a doctor."

"Where is Anastacio and Felipe?" queried Lopez.

"Why, they lit out, about the time the trouble started. I guess you don't know who your real friends are, Frank."

"I know you, when you muchacho. That time we good friend, yes?"

Johnny shrugged his shoulders.

"I make what you say, the wrong move," whispered Lopez.

Johnny ignored the other's intent to explain himself. "You better keep quiet. I'll get Doc Wordle, and —"

"I don' want those doctor," said Lopez. "One time I get shoot and I don' have those doctor and I get well. My brother he have the horse fall on him and those doctor come and he is dead."

"You *are* kind of a tough old bacon rind," said Johnny. "And you ain't hit bad: tore the muscle on your neck, some. You won't die."

"Then you stay? I don' like those doctor."

Johnny nodded. "I'll see how you make it, to-morrow."

Lopez closed his eyes. Johnny placed the water-bucket and dipper beside the bed, took his rifle and, crossing the clearing on foot, entered the timber. He had a supply of canned provisions and bacon in the cabin, but he wanted fresh meat. About four o'clock that afternoon he returned with a huge turkey gobbler slung

over his back. "How do you feel?" he asked as he entered the cabin.

"I sleep all time. Then you come."

Johnny gave the wounded man a drink of water. Lopez reached out his hand. Johnny stared at it. Then, flushing, he shook hands.

"If that's the way you feel about it, we'll call it a day," declared Johnny.

Yet he was not too sanguine as to the other's actual change of heart. He had known sick men to become suddenly penitent and then as suddenly revert to their former tactics upon recovery. However, Frank Lopez was not a bad fellow when sober, and it seemed to Johnny better to cast a grudge aside than to grow stoop-shouldered carrying it. So Johnny turned to biscuits and coffee and roast turkey, and felt better all round. In a day or so it might be possible for Lopez to ride to Solano. The wound was a clean wound. Lopez had bled freely. The only possible danger would be from blood-poisoning. The case called for much cold water and scant rations until the wounded man was on his feet again. Meanwhile, Johnny would not lack diversion. There was the gray stallion to break — and the sooner the better. The wild horse was rapidly regaining his strength and spirit, evident as he began to eat the meadow hay Johnny gave him that evening.

The following morning Johnny tackled the

job, after a night's sleep that put him in shape for the battle. And Frank Lopez, somewhat of a horseman himself, begged Johnny to help him to a chair by the open window that he might watch the fight. "You're weaker than a sick turkey," said Johnny. "You stay right where you are." And Johnny took his rope and saddle and stepped across to the corral. Without help it took him the better part of an hour to get the saddle on the stallion, and then he had to all but choke him to death to get that far. When Johnny finally cheeked him and swung up, the stallion, instead of going into the air, balked — refused to move an inch in spite of spur and rope-end plied hard and fast. Finally, a bit ashamed of the red that dripped from his rowels, Johnny stepped down and fought the horse all over the corral unsaddling him.

"Next time, something is going to pop," declared Johnny as he brushed the sweat from his face.

That evening Johnny fed Lopez some turkey broth, and later propped him up in bed so that he could smoke a cigarette. They talked about horses, an interest that drew them together on a common ground, roomy enough for much discussion and some argument, but allowing no standing-room for even the ghost of a grudge. Lopez was evidently feeling much bet-

ter, although his neck was rigid and his right arm seemingly paralyzed. Johnny bathed and cleansed the open wound and rebandaged it, soaking the bandages in hot water and soda to allay the inflammation. Like most hardy sons of the outlands they made a joke of the situation, Lopez cursing with extreme sincerity when the cleansing process wrought a dull ache into a stinging pain: Johnny cursing Lopez, in turn, when the latter squirmed and fidgeted.

The following morning Johnny was up and out early, having planned another session with the stallion. The plan included the use of the blue roan Pronto, but when Johnny glanced down the pasture neither Pronto nor Chico was in evidence. Johnny followed along the fence, found a fallen tree across the wire, and tracks that answered his silent question. He caught up his old pack-horse and fetched him up to the cabin.

"No show this morning," he told Lopez. "Both horses strayed. Don't you ride that gray while I'm gone."

"I ride this chair long time, I think," said Lopez.

A fillip of Chance sent Johnny Trent out across the high mesas hunting strayed horses while a deputy sheriff, burdened with the news that this same Johnny Trent had shot and killed Frank Lopez in a quarrel about a horse, left

Solano and Lopez's kin, and rode briskly toward the timberlands. The deputy approached the cabin whistling a tune, riding in the open, and anxious to let it be known that he was coming. He liked Johnny, and had reason to suspect that Johnny had been crowded into the quarrel. He wanted to talk with Johnny as friend to friend — and also as an officer of the law. While the deputy was utterly fearless, he was discreet. Hence he whistled a tune and rode in the open. The tune he whistled was one that he had heard in a dance-hall in Antelope, although he was utterly unaware of it. He wasn't thinking of music, just then.

And Frank Lopez, propped up in bed, heard the whistling, and called out, thinking it was Johnny. "Just tell them that you saw me —" ceased. The deputy called Johnny's name and was answered by a strange, muffled voice. He entered the cabin to find the dead man propped up in bed smoking a cigarette.

"Hello, Frank!" he called heartily, allowing the vehemence of his surprise to express itself in a conventional greeting. "Heard you got hurt."

"Si! I have the bad fall. I think it is my shoulder she is break."

The deputy didn't think so, as he viewed the bandages, but he made no comment, other than to indicate that he had hoped to see Johnny Trent.

Lopez, who surmised that his companions had told the deputy a different story, and anxious to shield Johnny, explained that the latter was out looking up some strayed stock and might not return until late that evening.

"Anything I can do for you?" queried the deputy.

"I am all fix good," declared Lopez. "Johnny he is my amigo. He do everything, yes?"

"Then I guess I'll mosey along. Horse throw you?"

"Si. I fall on the neck pretty bad."

"Thought you said it was your shoulder?"

"Si. I fall on the shoulder."

The deputy laughed. "Kind of fell all over yourself, eh?"

"I make dam' bad fall pretty good."

"I see you got that wild stallion corraled out there. He looks like a bad one."

"I tell Johnny that. Johnny say he just as wild as those horse, and he laugh. I think it is, Johnny he don' know to get the scare, yes?"

"Kind of figured him that way, myself. Say, Frank, how is it that Anastacio and Rico and young Felipe are telling folks down in Solano that Johnny bumped you off?"

"The horse he bump me off," declared Lopez stubbornly; and the deputy, who was pretty

well convinced that Lopez was suffering from a bullet wound and not a broken shoulder, realized that he was wasting his time trying to get Lopez to admit a quarrel or a shooting.

"Well, so-long," he said, helping himself to a drink of water. "Tell Johnny I just dropped in to see how he was making it."

"Adios. I tell him."

The deputy stepped out, stood a while looking at the captive stallion, and then mounted and rode back toward the low country. "Like hell Lopez'll tell him what I said," soliloquized the deputy as he jogged across the meadow. "He'll tell Johnny just what he wants him to know — same as he did me. Somethin' funny about it. Lopez and Johnny friendly — and old Anastacio says Johnny shot Lopez out of the saddle. Both Johnny and Frank are pretty tough propositions to handle trottin' single: but hitched in double harness —" The deputy shook his head. He whistled the same tune he had whistled when riding up to the cabin. After all, he was glad that he had not been obliged to approach Johnny in a strictly official capacity.

When Johnny returned, late that afternoon, he hesitated as he lifted his saddle and glanced at the ground in front of the cabin. "Who's been here?" he called to Lopez.

"Ward, he come," replied Lopez.

"Who?" Johnny lugged his saddle to the porch and stepped into the cabin.

"Ward, he come. He say how you are making it."

"Oh, did he say all that?"

"And I say to him," declared Lopez with some show of righteous pride, "that my horse jump and I fall on the shoulder and she is break. He shake the head and think it is funny how so much blood on the rag. Then he makes the pasear back to Solano. I think he shake the head all the time."

"Then mebby Felipe or Anastacio didn't tell him you took a shot at me just for luck?"

"I think it is Felipe he get the excite and forget that," said Lopez blandly.

"My dam was a mustang, white and proud," sang Johnny as he flopped his bed-roll open and straightened it. Frank Lopez had been pretty decent, after all. "My sire was as black as a thunder-cloud," sang Johnny. Yet Johnny was still the least bit skeptical as to Lopez's change of heart. Perhaps Lopez had been inspired to fabricate the "fall from a horse" yarn by the hope that the gray stallion would kill the man who tried to break him single-handed. Johnny glanced across at Lopez, whose gaze had been following his movements.

"If I don't get the shot, I help break those

caballo," he said. And Johnny knew that he meant it.

"My mistake," muttered Johnny, somewhat ambiguously.

CHAPTER X

"There is never a hoss that can't be rode,
And never a man that can't be throwed."
(From "Luck of the Range.")

THE following morning Lopez was able to move about, although he was still weak from loss of blood and the terrific shock. He had breakfast with Johnny and later followed him out to the corral to watch the breaking of the gray stallion. Unable to view the proceedings from the ground, Lopez asked Johnny to make a platform of empty boxes close to the corral stakes. Helped up on his improvised box seat, Lopez's head showed just above the corral top. The torn shoulder-muscle made it impossible for him to move his head, but his active eyes missed nothing. Johnny roped the stallion, snubbed him to the post, and fought him up, inch by inch. He heaved up the saddle and caught the cinch on the swing.

As Johnny slackened the rope, the stallion reared and deliberately threw himself. When he came up, Johnny was in the saddle. The stallion lunged and reared again. Johnny hit him between the ears with the butt of his heavy quirt. The stallion came down, forelegs rigid. A thin dust cloud gathered. With a grunt and a squeal

of rage the wild horse ran at the side of the corral and tried to crush Johnny's leg against the stakes. Johnny jerked his foot free from the stirrup and turned his toe out. As the horse crashed against the stakes, the spur sank into the stallion's side. He pitched across to the other side of the enclosure, reared, went up in the air, and came down with all four legs set. A thin streak of blood showed on Johnny's upper lip. He was taking some terrific punishment. The stallion was both big and quick. He had no special system of pitching, but tried everything in the calendar of outlaws, and it kept Johnny busy trying to out-guess the probabilities.

The stallion's eyes were filmed with blind rage. He swung his head and tried to bite Johnny's leg. Johnny promptly kicked him in the nose. Again the wild horse threw himself and tried to roll on his rider — to crush him. But Johnny kept the hackamore taut. The stallion could not raise his head to turn over. Then Johnny let him up. The stallion went into the air, "swapped ends," and came down with his back arched. The instant he hit the ground he went up again, forward and sideways, pitching with a roll and a swing that snapped Johnny's head back and forth until he was almost blind.

Lopez sat huddled up, watching Johnny with admiration and envy. The Mexican's little

bloodshot eyes burned with an intensity of feeling that made him forget his wound, his weakened condition, everything, save that the fight would not end until one or the other was either killed or subdued — and neither seemed to know what it meant to quit. The stallion went into the air again, bunched his feet, and hit the ground like a falling meteor. The cinch snapped. The saddle turned. Johnny tried to save himself, but he was thrown head first against the side of the corral. He lay inert, crumpled up like an empty sack. The stallion circled the corral, his ears flat, his teeth bared. Lopez called to Johnny; clambered down from the box, hobbled to the cabin and snatched the rope from his saddle. He groaned as he hastened back. The stallion, gone mad with fear and hate, rushed at the inert figure on the ground and sank his teeth into Johnny's shoulder. Lopez, balancing himself on the boxes, muttered a prayer to the saints, and flipped a loop. It was a difficult cast, over the side of the corral, yet the loop dropped true, struck on edge, and turned. As the noose touched the stallion's off hind foot, he kicked, and virtually looped himself.

Lopez dallied round one of the corral stakes. The stallion, fighting the snare, let go of Johnny's shoulder. Lopez clambered down from the boxes and hobbled round to the corral gate. He felt

sick. The corral veered and rocked as he entered. The gray stallion, his hind leg outstretched, was kicking to free himself from the rope. He was still between Lopez and the crumpled figure on the ground. The Mexican stepped nearer. The wild horse lunged away to one side. Lopez gathered all his waning strength, and, groaning as the pain of his movements bit into his neck and shoulder, ran in and dragged Johnny to the gateway.

He barely made it through when the rope snapped and the stallion charged him. He crashed against the bars, battered at them with his forefeet. Lopez just managed to drag Johnny beyond the gate, when the corral and the frenzied horse, the distant trees, the sky, faded into night. Lopez sank down. A faint red tinge spread on his bandages. His tremendous exertions had burst open the wound.

When he came to he was lying in the cabin and Johnny was dashing water in his face. For an hour Lopez lay watching Johnny as he moved about the room, restless with the pain of his own injured shoulder. Johnny smoked innumerable cigarettes, muttered to himself, and occasionally stopped pacing up and down, to get a drink of water. Dazed, he did not know just what had happened after he was thrown: but he surmised that Lopez must have dragged him from the

corral, knew that his companion must have made some tremendous exertion because the wound had begun to bleed again. Johnny had rebandaged it with strips torn from an old shirt.

Not until sundown was Lopez able to speak, other than to ask for water occasionally. And then he told Johnny briefly what had happened. Johnny had noticed the broken bit of rope on the stallion's hind leg — and he knew that it was the Mexican's rope. When Lopez had finished telling just what had happened, Johnny grasped his hand.

"At first I got you wrong, Frank. But now I sabe."

Lopez blinked. "You make to ride those wild horse some more?"

"Sure! Why, we ain't even got acquainted, yet."

CHAPTER XI

"Such a horse! but to name him, from barrel that's deep and round,
To pastern slender and fetlock firm and hoof square-set to ground;
A ripple of moving muscles that play to the reaching stride —
No mortal attains perfection — but give me that horse to ride!"

THE two huge trunks had been taken downstairs to the veranda. About two o'clock, that afternoon, Grace Percival came down from her room attired in a smart traveling gown. She was gloved and wore a veil. Seated in the big chair at the end of the veranda she waited for the stage which, she had been advised, was to leave an hour later than usual owing to some necessary repairs. Early that morning she had received a telegram, relayed from Antelope, stating that her guardian, Samuel Percival, had been seriously injured in an automobile accident — and that his recovery was doubtful. The message implied further that her presence in Chicago was advisable in order that she might look after her interests in case Percival succumbed to his injuries. The message contained no details as to the accident. It was signed by Percival's secretary.

Grace Percival was too well aware of her guardian's habits to be altogether surprised by

the news. He was noted as a reckless driver when, upon occasion, his chauffeur grudgingly relinquished the wheel to him. Only for a moment did Grace Percival allow herself to doubt the veracity of the message, and that was because she had recently advised her guardian, by letter, that her stay in Arizona would be indefinite. Percival had argued against her going to Arizona in the first place, declaring that it was a whim which she would regret. In a year she would become mistress of her own fortune. He had so long been a member of the firm and had controlled its policy so many years that the idea of losing even partial control of the finances was distasteful to him. Grace Percival had been far from flattered by his reiterated proposals of marriage, resenting his insistence almost as much as his reason for it.

However, it was the coincidence of her own desire to leave Arizona, and the receipt of the telegram importuning her to come home, which troubled Grace Percival. She tried to believe that it was mere chance, that her recently formed decision to return to Chicago had nothing to do with the news of Percival's accident. Alone much of the time since Johnny Trent had left Solano, and free from the anticipation of seeing him daily, she took time to reflect and decided that her romance with the young cowboy was a mis-

take which she did not altogether regret, yet realized fully. And it was because she cared for him that she determined to leave, as the quickest and simplest solution of the difficulty. While she had been momentarily sincere, when with him, she felt that it was utterly unfair even to intimate, by a longer sojourn in Solano, that their companionship could become more than it was. He would be hurt, angry, and would hardly forgive her. Yet that would be better than a pretense on her part that she cared enough for him to marry him. She had lived upon his enthusiasms, his virile personality. She saw the land as he saw it, a spacious and wonderful empire of range and mesa, of sunlight and clean air, and vistas limitless and alluring. To Johnny Trent it was home. To her it was a magnificent picture, an experience, an adventure. But to live in the picture all her days, to become a part of it, to be loyal to her decision and to Johnny Trent — that, she dared not believe, was possible. The habit of wealth subdued and smothered her actual self. And, paradoxically, she was more her actual self, when she decided never to see him again, than when she had begged him to come back to her that night when he had left for the hills. But Johnny would not understand: yet the telegram was an uncontrovertible reason for her leaving.

Mrs. Johnson would tell Johnny. Grace Percival wondered what he would say when he heard the news. She was glad he was away, that she would not have to tell him herself. She was both glad, and relieved, because she really feared that should she see him again, some gesture, word or glance might persuade her that she could live in the picture and be content.

Gazing down the sleepy street toward the distant mesa, wondering when the stage would come for her, wishing, in spite of her conclusions that she might see Johnny Trent again, even though she dreaded the interview, Grace Percival's brown eyes widened the slightest bit as she saw two horsemen drawing slowly toward Solano. As they came nearer, she saw that there was something familiar about the horseman who rode the big gray — a handsome animal, viciously active under restraint, difficult to handle. Unconsciously she clutched the arm of the chair. One of the horsemen was Johnny Trent, returned from his quest. And the gray horse? Could it be *the* gray stallion? Johnny had said he would not return without the horse. If only he had returned a day later! Or if the stage had not been delayed for repairs! What could she say?

Down the long and all-but-empty street he rode, swaying to the restless lunge of the wild

horse. Flecks of foam danced in the sunlit air. Close to him rode Frank Lopez, sitting his horse stiffly, yet as watchful as a coyote, his hand on the rope coiled at the saddle-fork. The stallion was wet with sweat. He tossed his head and his mane rippled along the great arch of his neck like flowing silver. And Johnny? He was the same — and yet not the same. Grace Percival saw — and realized that he had both lost and gained something. His face was less boyish, the quick laughter of his eyes was gone, his manner more subdued — yet against the loss he had gained a visible maturity, and with it something akin to the quality of the horse he rode. To Grace Percival it was so obvious that she caught her breath. While Johnny rode with quiet poise and lithe assurance, there was no trace of recklessness or unwarranted pride in his bearing — but there was evident a grim restraint of which she had not deemed him capable. She had begged him to come back to her. He had come back. Already she felt that his eyes accused her. Not that — yet they appraised her frankly. And she was afraid of him.

Johnny reined the stallion toward the veranda and raised his battered sombrero. "I fetched this one in alive," he said, smiling.

His swift glance shifted from her face to the two trunks and then back again. The stallion

curveted and reared. Johnny brought him round and down, and Grace Percival glanced at the rowels of his spurs. She shivered within herself. Here was the reality — a great, and still unconquered beast, foam-breasted in the sun, beautiful in the wonder of his strength and symmetry, wild pride burning in his quick, full eyes, and a threat of disaster in every breath that filled his rounded nostrils. The battered saddle, the close-coiled rope, the heavy hackamore, knotted close; Johnny's gloved hand, the fingers of the glove worn to shreds, his boots, his spurs, his hat scored by the brush — everything about him accentuated the reality that accused her, mocked her, and told her that she was a lie and a reproach. For she had given her lips to his, and an unuttered promise which she did not mean to keep.

"I came back," said Johnny. And in that brief declaration Grace Percival read, not only his promise fulfilled, but a challenge.

Johnny sat the gray stallion like a conqueror. He had not offered to dismount. He was in the saddle, solid in his mastery, playing his own game and playing it well, although he did not realize it. And suddenly Grace Percival realized that, no matter how much she cared for him, and how much he cared for her, her mastery of him could never become an accomplished fact. He

was like the magnificent animal he rode, untamed, and would be so as long as he lived.

"No — he ain't a safe horse," said Johnny as though he had read her thought.

Grace Percival rose and drew a crumpled slip of yellow paper from her glove. The stallion jumped sideways as she reached out to give the paper to Johnny. "I wanted you to read it," she said.

Frank Lopez reined over and took the telegram. As Johnny brought the stallion under control, he took the paper from Lopez. Johnny flicked the telegram open and read it. The stallion fretted and pawed the road. Grace Percival watched Johnny's face, her own eyes wide, startled, and intense. Johnny Trent glanced up from the telegram, met her gaze; and she never forgot the look in his eyes. It seemed to her as though he was impersonally studying some curious object that he had just discovered and which puzzled him. There was no warmth in his gaze, no sign of their earlier intimacy, no hint of his own silent fight with himself to keep from speaking. Grace Percival knew that the telegram was to him as transparent as crystal; that he read in it her excuse for leaving Solano, and through it saw the reason for her going. It flashed across her mind that he was master of himself. She tried to vision his battle with the

wild stallion, and she was horsewoman enough to know that it had been a bitter fight: and, withal, that while the gray stallion submitted to being handled at the moment, he could never be tamed.

Again Johnny Trent seemed to interpret her thought. "Once in a while there's one you can't tame," he said, and as he spoke he swung down and stood beside the stallion. Before Grace Percival realized what Johnny intended, he had jerked the cinch loose. Simultaneously he slipped saddle and hackamore from the wild horse. For an instant the gray stallion stood motionless, not aware that he was free. Then, with a snort, he whirled, flung up his head and thundered down the street. He sped straight for the open mesa, for the hills beyond, boring into the west, growing smaller. Topping the distant mesa rim, he turned, the long, slanting sunlight of mid-afternoon rippling on his back, his shoulders, his mane like flowing silver. With high, disdainful crest curved like the arch of a drawn bow, with proud forefoot raised, he whistled a challenge: a living statue framed by the turquoise of the Arizona sky. Then with a lift and turn, he flung away into the spaces — a flash of silver-gray vanishing across the wild to seek his kindred and his home.

Johnny shouldered his saddle. With his free hand he gave the telegram back to Grace Per-

cival. "Once in a while there's one you can't tame," he said again, gazing at the woman who had been his vision and his desire. She seemed strange to him now — another being. He heard a small voice within himself reiterating: "She made a fool of me! She made a fool of me!" His face went white. "Good-bye, Grace," he murmured. For an instant the Johnny Trent she had known returned in his farewell. She flung out her slender arms, her hands appealing. She knew from his eyes, heavy with unutterable grief, that she had killed the Johnny Trent whom she had loved. Her heart swelled with pity, with a sudden longing. Yet she did not speak — she could not.

Johnny turned and strode across the street, the saddle on his shoulder, the hackamore reins trailing in the dust. Frank Lopez reined his horse round and followed him.

Julia Baker, screened by the veranda vines, watched from her home across the street. She saw Johnny and Frank Lopez drift toward the Mexican end of the town. A few minutes later the stage drew up to Johnson's, the two trunks were loaded in, and Grace Percival, taking her seat beside the driver, turned and glanced toward the Baker home. Julia Baker had not appeared to bid her farewell.

The stage stopped at the store, the mail sacks

were roped on top of the trunks. A thin cloud of dust trailed after the stage as it departed. Passing through the Mexican quarter, Grace Percival saw Johnny Trent and Frank Lopez in the latter's corral, Johnny talking earnestly to the Mexican, who held a coiled reata in his hand. Three horses were huddled together in the far end of the corral. She noted them indifferently, a buckskin, a bay, and a sorrel. The sorrel was a big horse for that country, possibly fifteen-and-a-half hands high. The bay had a blaze face and one white foot. The stage swept past on the smooth mesa road. Neither Johnny nor Lopez glanced toward it, though they must have known that it was passing. The afternoon mesa spread wide, green, illimitable, and across it ran a thread of gray road, winding into space.

"Reckon we'll be late getting into Concho," declared the driver of the buckboard, gesturing with his whip. "Had to have a tire set. Held me up 'most two hours."

CHAPTER XII

"When Carmen sang in Sandoval — that summer night in Sandoval —
Vaqueros drank tequila with Rurales from the South,
While scornful of the show they made, a somber Gringo renegade
Watched dark Felipe as he played — and Carmen's saucy mouth."

SANDOVAL happens to be in Old Mexico, and is not to be confused with Solano, Arizona. Yet their adobe cantinas with sky-blue doors and window-frames, their earthen floors beaten hard and smooth by the comings and goings of the many, their small battered tables and chairs and their meager interior decorations, are similar, even to the tequila, which is an interior decoration amazing and potent. It has been said that three drinks of tequila and a loaded six-shooter will make a bandit out of the most timid chola that ever hoed beans.

No somber Gringo renegade sat in José de la Cruz y Barra's cantina that afternoon, but Johnny Trent was somber enough as he drank tequila with Frank Lopez, both standing at the narrow, blue-topped bar, each with a glass in his fist and each occupied with his own thoughts. The tequila was incidental to the mood and the hour. Something in Johnny's attitude disturbed

the serenity of the proprietor, José, who knew him ordinarily as a sprightly youth who laughed and talked. But this afternoon Johnny was silent and exceedingly formal in everything he did, from rolling a cigarette to paying for the liquor. Old José, while familiar with all the moods prompted by tequila, read, in Johnny Trent's altogether too quiet attitude, a subdued recklessness, a smouldering antipathy unaccountably strange. Johnny stepped to the doorway, glanced at the two saddled horses standing at the hitch-rail, and returned to the bar.

"We can fan it in about half-an-hour," he said to Lopez. "Have another, Frank."

Again they drank together. Johnny made a cigarette. Lopez hastily struck a match and proffered a light. José stared. A few weeks ago Lopez and Johnny Trent had been bitter enemies.

Johnny considered old José for a cold few seconds. "Your eyes hurt you?" he asked in Spanish.

José, to escape Johnny's gaze, wiped the bar and was about to remove the bottle and glasses — six glasses of tequila within a half-hour was sufficient for the hardiest — when Lopez slapped the top of the bar.

"Aqui!" he growled. "My amigo drinks with me, the next one."

Old José replaced the bottle and glasses. Johnny was smiling. His somber eyes were unreadable. José muttered an apology.

Again they drank together, mechanically. And again Johnny stepped to the doorway and glanced at the horses, and down the street. The long shadows lay black against the far, white road beyond the town where the junipers grew along the winding ditches of the highway. A tiny cloud of dust rolled low in the distance, and ahead of it a dark speck moved on and on toward the north. The dust cloud settled, vanished, rose again, still farther away. The Solano stage was making good time, yet it would not reach Concho before dark. The stage always stopped at Concho for the night, proceeding toward Antelope in the early morning. Johnny tossed his half-smoked cigarette into the street and, turning, gazed toward the south, the far, blue ranges rising above the mesa land, the hills that he called home.

Then, Lopez was beside him in the doorway, his hand on Johnny's shoulder. "You will not go back to-night, my friend?" said Lopez in Spanish. "My casa is yours."

"Then why did you saddle up and ride over here with me?"

Lopez shrugged his broad shoulders and winced as he awakened the pain of his wound.

"Quien sabe? Perhaps it is good that I go with you."

"How about your wife and the kids?"

"Oh, I give my wife the money you give me — but not all. I think it is that my wife does not say where I go."

"Come on, then," said Johnny.

They rode over to Lopez's corral as the brief twilight absorbed the shadows, where they dismounted. Lopez stepped round to the house and told his wife that he was going over to La Cienaga to visit a cousin. While he was in the house, Johnny caught and saddled the buckskin. When Lopez came out to the corral, Johnny was knotting a lead-rope on the spare horse.

"I'm going to borrow this cayuse for a couple of days," he declared.

Lopez nodded. He was not surprised: in fact, nothing could have surprised him very much, just then. He felt blandly indifferent to anything save the fact that he and Johnny Trent had consumed much tequila and were still sober. He was the least bit annoyed because they were both sober.

Johnny took the lead-rope of the buckskin and mounted the bay. "If I don't show up right away, you needn't worry about the horses."

"'Sta bueno!"

Lopez felt assured that his friend was not going

back to his mountain cabin. Yet he was going somewhere, taking a led horse along. A great change had come over his friend since he had talked with the beautiful señorita of the brown eyes — and since he had so foolishly freed the gray stallion. Also his friend had drunk much tequila, which was an unusual thing for him to do. Lopez took the reins of the big sorrel, swung to the saddle, and, leaning forward, touched Johnny's arm. "I think it is good that I go with you," he said.

Night was upon the mesas. The stars were brilliant in a cloudless sky. Once clear of the town they rode swiftly, cutting across the wagon-road and heading into the north. They crossed the Black Mesa wash some two miles west of the highway. Lopez surmised that their destination was Concho. Of a truth, the stage would stop there for the night. Perhaps Johnny and the young señorita had arranged to meet in Concho and get married. They had quarreled, but then, that was a small matter. No doubt the señorita had been provoked because Johnny had let the gray stallion go, knowing that it was unsafe for her to ride. So Frank Lopez reasoned as the three horses moved briskly across the starlit mesa. The pace grew slower as they entered the junipers bordering the low hills surrounding Concho. Moving shadows among the stiff shad-

ows of the trees, they climbed the easy slope. Topping the slope they struck a faster gait. Johnny reined up. From the east came the faint sound of plodding horses and the rattle of a wagon.

"It is the stage," said Lopez.

"You take the buckskin, and wait here," said Johnny. "If you hear a shot, light out for Solano and forget where you been."

"I wait," said Lopez as he dismounted and held the two horses.

Johnny drifted away in the starlight. Below, and to the left lay the dim road, the highway between Solano and Concho. He crossed the road and, turning, faced it, screened by a clump of junipers. The clattering wagon drew nearer, the horses coming at a fast trot. Old Henry Watkins, the driver, was telling Grace Percival that they would soon be in Concho, and that they had escaped considerable heat by driving at night, when a horseman moved out from the shadowy roadside and stopped directly in front of the team. Old Henry pulled up, thinking that some belated cowboy wished to speak to him.

Immediately it became evident that some one did wish to speak to him.

"Drop the reins," said a voice, and it was not the circumstance itself, but the quality of the voice that caused Old Henry to thrust up his

hands. He knew when a voice meant business. "I got a lady with me," declared the old man. "You needn't to git careless with that gun."

"You can both step down," said the voice.

Grace Percival, even then, did not realize what had actually happened — that the stage had been held up and that the highwayman was inviting her to get down from the seat and stand in the road. She did not realize it, because she had been thinking of Johnny Trent — and now he was speaking. She knew his voice, and that was real, although the place, the circumstance, and the dim figure on horseback seemed unreal, impossible. Old Henry obeyed the command and Grace Percival followed him mechanically.

"Got a gun on you?" queried Johnny, through the handkerchief masking his face.

"No, I ain't!" spluttered Old Henry. "It's in the rig, under a ton of trunks and mail."

Suddenly Grace Percival realized where she was and what was happening. Her blood quickened. She feared the man whom she thought she had cheated. Why had he followed her, intercepted her?

"Got any cash, this trip?" asked Johnny.

"Nope! Nothin' but trunks and mail and a tourist."

"I'll take your word for it. Get back into the rig."

"You mean both me and her?" queried Old Henry.

"Yes. I'll help the lady in."

Old Henry, glad to be let off so easily — for he had decided to make a fight should the highwayman offer harm to the woman — scrambled stiffly up to the seat. Before he could gather up the reins, Johnny swung his quirt and struck the off horse across the flank. The team lunged forward and broke into a run as Old Henry fumbled for the reins. The buckboard veered into the ditch, struck a juniper-root, and bounced back into the road again. The reins flipped up over the dash and dropped between the horses.

"And now, Grace," said Johnny quietly, "you can step upon my horse and I'll lead him. I rode down here to have a little talk with you — and I'm going to have it."

"But — Johnny! What does this mean?"

"I said it. Step up on that horse. You needn't be afraid I'll touch you. But you're going to listen to what I got to say."

"So this is what one may expect from the chivalrous Westerner who never mistreats a woman?"

"When the woman is your kind — yes. If Old Henry Watkins gets his team stopped and turns back, somebody is going to get hurt. Suit yourself."

Grace Percival shrugged her shoulders. "I thought I cared for you — a little. But I hate you!" Nevertheless, she allowed Johnny to help her to the saddle, where she sat sideways, poised, and never anything but graceful. Johnny led the horse from the road and into the junipers of the low hillside. On the crest of a rounded hill he whistled. A voice answered his signal. Lopez appeared in an opening among the junipers, leading the two horses.

Johnny shortened the stirrups on the buckskin. "It'll be a long ride," he said, turning to Grace Percival.

She shrugged her shoulders assuming an indifference she did not feel. "Of course I'll go with you, if you make me. Don't think I am the least bit afraid. But I hope you realize what you are doing."

"I do. But you don't. Try the stirrups. If they ain't right, I'll change 'em. It's a long drill — and I want you to be comfortable."

"Comfortable! How considerate of you!"

Johnny felt the hot blood surge to his face. "I could have killed you — to-day; shot you down where you stood. But to-night, why, shucks! I wouldn't lift a finger to even touch you. The idea is, we're going to begin all over again, right from the start. I'm the same man you made a fool of; but you, you are not the same woman, now. I

guess it's the first time you ever took orders from anybody. But you are taking orders from me, from now on. Stirrups all right? Then come on. Mebby you don't know what holding up the United States mail means, but I do."

To be ordered from a vehicle, even as poor a contraption as the Solano stage, and ordered to mount a horse and ride wherever her captor chose to take her, was an experience that had no parallel in Grace Percival's hitherto conventional life. The abruptness of the occurrence itself startled and shocked her, yet deep in her heart she experienced a thrill of anticipation, of awe, and, while she resented the method, the adventure was not altogether unpleasant. And the contrast of Johnny Trent's present attitude toward her, with his behavior at parting in Solano, was not as displeasing as she wished to make it appear. She thought that he had given her up — as she had given him up when he had turned away from her a few hours before. And now he had claimed her again — literally kidnaped her. She could understand that. Intuitively she had known all along he was capable of carrying out almost anything he set his hand to, either within or without the law. She had admired him for the hearty common sense that had heretofore held him steady. But that he, knowing her mission in Chicago — for she would not admit even to her-

self that she had planned to run away from him — could deliberately set his heel upon her intent and crush it without a sign of remorse was beyond her comprehension.

Accustomed to the barriers of convention which none of the men she had known would think of scaling, Grace Percival suddenly faced a reality as primitive as drinking from a mountain spring in the wild Solano hills. Her social prestige, her wealth, meant nothing whatever to Johnny Trent; and the law, written or unwritten, meant nothing to him. He had said he could have killed her. She believed him. She had always known that beneath his genial manner ran a strong current of determination against which she would be powerless, should some issue force the test. And as she rode between the swart silent Mexican and Johnny Trent, across the fragrant night-spaces, beneath the Arizona stars, she realized at last why individuals made laws for themselves in that far-reaching and sparsely inhabited land.

They rode toward the south, swinging wide of Solano and bearing toward the dim ranges that bulked against the velvet sky. The junipers gave place to greasewood. The sandy plain of a dry lake hushed the sound of their progress. Again the junipers crept round them, shadowy and grotesque. Presently they were riding among the

cypress and small pine. The fragrance of the night forest came intermittently on the cool breezes of the uplands. A wooded cañon wound on and up toward the high mesas and the spruce. Until then, none of them had spoken. The narrow trail forced them to ride single-file, Johnny in the lead, Grace Percival following, and Lopez riding behind her.

"That horse you're riding is used to this trail," said Johnny, turning in the saddle.

"Thank you. I am not at all afraid of the horse."

Grace Percival smiled at Johnny's somewhat incongruous solicitude. Not so many hours ago he had ridden into Solano on a horse as wild and as vicious as she had ever seen — and the gray stallion of the high mesas was to have been hers.

When the cañon trail found the level of the upland meadows, edged with the deep night-shadows of the encircling timber, Johnny sent Lopez on ahead, telling him in Spanish to make a fire in the cabin stove and put some fresh water in the coffee-pot.

About an hour later Johnny and Grace Percival dismounted at a small cabin fronting a wide, starlit meadow. Lopez took the horses. Johnny stepped aside, gesturing to Grace Percival to enter the cabin. "It didn't cost a million dollars," he said as she gazed round the orderly room, "but

it's clean and decent." A fire was going in the stove, and the warmth was welcome, as was the hot coffee which Lopez had made.

Grace Percival drew off her gloves and placed them daintily on the edge of the home-made table. "I would like a drink of water, first," she said.

Johnny filled the one and only glass and proffered it. She glanced up at him as she gave the glass back. The slender oval of her face, her dark eyes, glowing softly in the lamplight, the shimmering luster of her hair — she had removed her hat and veil — recalled poignant memories that Johnny would not have chosen to recall just then. His hand trembled as he took the glass.

She glanced round the room, then swept across it to a chair by the south window. Seating herself she again glanced round the room.

"The looking-glass is here," said Johnny, indicating a small shaving-glass against the cabin wall.

"Thank you. But I'm not so frightfully disarranged by my ride. At least your eyes do not accuse me —"

"At your old game?" said Johnny, shrugging his shoulders.

"Of making myself agreeable? Yes. You have been rough — at times — but that is the first rude thing you have ever said to me," she declared, smiling.

Johnny flushed. But he was not to be cajoled into a humor to suit her fancy — not he!

"Besides, if it is a game, what other game could I play, to please you?" she said. "Would you have me flatter you by pretending that I am frightened? Perhaps you thought I would become hysterical and plead for my freedom. You have brought me here — I really can't imagine why — and, as you intimated not long ago, you want me to be comfortable. But how can I feel comfortable when you act like a chained bear?"

Johnny laughed harshly. "No chains on me now, Miss Percival."

"But yes! You have chained yourself to me, haven't you?"

"No. But you are going to promise to marry me before you leave this wickiup, or —"

"Or what, Johnny?"

"Or tell me on your oath that you never did care enough for me to look at me twice. Just say without lying, that you were stringing me along for the fun of it. Then you can leave here any minute you want to. You wouldn't be worth your keep."

"Without lying? Did I lie to you when I told you — but why discuss it? Besides, I'm rather sleepy."

"I don't say you lied to me, in words," asserted Johnny. "But you did as much when you

pretended you liked me well enough to marry me. You strung me along —"

"Do you believe I 'strung you along,' as you say?"

Johnny clenched his hands. The sweat stood out on his flushed forehead. "No — damn it! I wish you had. Then I could forget."

Grace Percival rose and faced Johnny, the flame of pride in her cheeks, her little head held haughtily. "I did lie to you, when I allowed you to believe that I cared enough to marry you. And now I am paying for the lie — and I'll pay the full price. Putting aside what you have done — and what you made me do, to-night, I am your prisoner. We will make a new beginning. You say you love me. Oh, yes, or you wouldn't have made me come here after I showed you the telegram stating that my guardian was not expected to live. And I please to stay here, to humor your mood. I'll not try to run away. I'll stay. What are you going to do with me?"

Johnny flung round and started toward the door. Yet the fascination of her personality was upon him like a net within which he might struggle, but from which he could never break free. He wanted to rush from her presence, to breathe the cool night air —

"Johnny!"

He turned toward her as she whispered his name.

"Johnny!" she whispered again.

Defiantly he faced her, strode to her, his eyes burning into hers like the eyes of a desert wanderer dying of thirst, yet knowing that the mirage is cheating his desire. She touched his sleeve. Her slender hand crept to his shoulder. All of herself was in her eyes, questioning, wondering, speaking a truth beyond the grace of word or gesture. Slowly she drew her veil from the table, stepped back from him, toyed with the soft, silken folds, crushed the veil in her hands, gazing at it unseeingly.

"Strike me, or kill me," she murmured, "but don't act like a sullen brute."

Her mood changed. She smiled again. "If you really want to please me, tell me where I'll find a brush and comb, and some soap, for the morning."

"I got that — that satchel of yours from the buckboard," stammered Johnny.

Grace Percival remembered having seen Johnny hand something to the other man just before they began their long ride to the hills. She thought it significant that Johnny had been even that thoughtful of her, and she showed her appreciation in both tone and manner as she asked him to get the satchel for her. In a few minutes he returned with it and bade her a gruff good-night.

Lopez, who had left the cabin after serving the

coffee, was sitting out by the corral, smoking. "I fix those bed," he said, gesturing toward the edge of the timber back of the stable.

"Well, we might as well turn in," said Johnny. "I'm going to light out early for Solano. I may be gone two, three days."

"Solano! I think if you go there you stay long time. They look for the hombre that make the hold-up, and you get catch."

"No. If I show up in Solano to-morrow, it will look better than if we both stayed away. Besides, they won't be so likely to come up here. You are supposed to be in La Cienaga. Your job is to stick right here, cook the meals, and look after the place. Whatever Miss Percival tells you to do, do it — but don't saddle a horse for her. Sabe?"

"Si. If those mans come —"

"Stand 'em off from the cabin if you can, but no shooting. If they find out, why, we're up against it. Don't talk. Just tell 'em you're working for me, and to hunt me up and I'll explain."

Lopez shook his head. He did not quite catch Johnny's drift, yet he had explicit faith in his ability — and marksmanship.

"I'm trusting you, Frank," said Johnny.

"I think I can only get kill once," declared Lopez.

CHAPTER XIII

"You'll be able to recognize me in that crowd," said the cowpuncher, "because I'll have my hands in my own pockets." (From Gene Rhodes, "Cigarette Papers.")

SAMUEL PERCIVAL and his secretary Thompson, in the offices of Percival & Percival, of Chicago, were discussing a telegram from Antelope, Arizona. The telegram stated that Grace Percival would take the first available train for Chicago.

"My little scheme worked," declared Percival, swinging round in his desk-chair and rising heavily. "She'll be pretty mad when she finds out there wasn't any accident. But I had to do something to get her back here. She simply ignored my recent letters telling her that it was absolutely necessary that she return. I tell you, Dick, we're running too dam' close to the edge on that Superior deal. We've got to get hold of more capital, or we'll wake up some fine morning in the pententiary. Grace has been away over a month, now, and every letter from her indicates that she doesn't want to come back to this little old town. And, honest, I was getting lonesome."

"Your own fault, then," said Thompson, a sallow, smooth-mannered, and exceedingly well-groomed individual. His dark eyebrows raised

slightly as Percival opened the safe and fetched out a squat bottle and glasses. Thompson declined the proffered drink with a gesture. "You drink too much, Sam."

"But I'm never drunk," chuckled Percival. "Here's a lone toast to little Grace with the high head. But I guess I've let the check-rein get a little slack, lately, eh?"

"Yours?"

"Can that! You don't know a thing. Now would you imagine that Grace would fall so hard for that outdoor stuff, right after three years in Europe, and spending all kinds of money? I tell you, Dick, I made a mistake when I consented to her trip West. Why, she actually wants to stay out there in that cow-town six months! Says so. Maybe she likes the looks of some of those young Buffalo Bills out there. You can't always tell."

"Sometimes it's a good plan not to."

"That's the big reason why you work for me, Dick." Percival was plainly irritated by his secretary's evident lack of sympathy.

"And the big reason you are afraid to fire me," said Thompson. "Put that bottle of Scotch back in the safe and come on and have dinner with me. I'm famished. It's eight o'clock. I'll get a timetable in the lobby. It's about a day and a half from Antelope to Chicago, I believe."

"Just one more nip and I'm with you. I see

Quigley got his when Great Northerns broke today."

"Yes, the Hathaway bunch got him."

"Glad of it! Wish I'd been the one to knife him. And say, Dick, that little touch about my getting hurt on the way from Blake's was a peach. Grace will believe that. I took her out to Blake's once. She knows I like that joint. But it feels queer even to have somebody wire that you are dying. Gives me the Willies. I look like I was going to cash in, don't I?"

"You carry too much fat — and your hand shakes," said Thompson, impersonally. "But what's the use talking to you?"

"No use at all. Grace knows that. I do as I dam' please, and I make money enough to pay the shot, and then some. And money, my boy, is the whole thing. And don't you forget that little Grace knows it!"

"Miss Percival *can* spend money," said Thompson, smiling.

"Spend it! You bet your sweet life! And that's what's worrying me, right now. She hasn't drawn on her account since she left. Using her personal income. Something funny about that. She sent for her riding-togs. She's going in for that simple life stuff. Tell you what, Dick, it's time she got back. She might learn to enjoy herself without a bank-roll."

"Or marry some rancher, and change the firm name of Percival & Percival. But you've got power of attorney — and if that Superior deal gets too heavy to swing —" Thompson shrugged his shoulders.

Samuel Percival replaced the squat bottle and glasses and closed the safe. He took his Panama hat from the desk. "If it gets too heavy, Grace will have to help us out. Now if she was my wife"

Percival gestured toward the northern windows

"I could hold that Superior stock until hell froze over the bunch that's trying to put out my light. And if we can hold on another month, we can retire. If we can't, we'll be retired all right."

They made their way to the elevator. As it reached the street floor with a rush, Percival staggered and grasped Thompson's arm. Thompson steadied him out to the street. Percival's face was dead white and he gasped for breath.

"Dam' those express elevators," he whispered.

"And a weak heart," said Thompson. "You're racing your engine, Sam. Don't forget that it's August — and this is Chicago."

"Call a taxi. I'll be all right in a minute."

Thompson glanced quickly at his employer, who had asked for a taxi when his own private car was standing almost directly in front of them, parked close to the high curb. He helped Percival in and took a seat beside him.

An hour later Percival and his secretary were dining in a fashionable café, scantily attended by guests on account of the season. Percival had recovered from his dizziness and ate heartily. His secretary, who was tall, spare, and of an austere inclination, dined with some regard for the weather — and his health.

Twelve hours later Percival received a telegram from the sheriff of Antelope County, stating that the Solano stage had been held up near Concho, and that Miss Percival, *en route* to Antelope, had disappeared. The wire stated further that a posse was already out, riding the country — that every effort was being made to find the lone bandit and Miss Percival.

Samuel Percival, because of business necessity which demanded the presence of Grace Percival, or the failure of the firm, was more enraged than solicitous when he took the evening train for Kansas City and west. If he could talk with his ward, explain matters, he might be able to induce her to take some actual interest in the affairs of Percival & Percival. He could hardly believe there was not some mistake about her having been lost or kidnaped. He wired to Antelope from the train, directing the sheriff to spare no expense in locating the missing young woman.

CHAPTER XIV

"Do you remember the camp we made in the noon of an idle day?
The hot, white light and the velvet shade, with the world so far away,
When the mesa wide to the ranges blue was a golden hush of space?
You said no word, yet your eyes were true. Do you remember, Grace?"

JOHNNY and Frank Lopez were up at daybreak, watered the horses, and, without recognizing their position as ludicrous, smoked and stared gloomily at the cabin. Under pressure of necessity, either man could and would have gone hours without food with no slightest hint of irritation betraying his hunger. But with provisions so near and yet so unavailable, a tantalizing hunger gnawed them, perversely increased by their mental attitude. They drank from the spring and obtained a brief satisfaction. The low morning sun blazed across the eastern tree-tops and flung slender golden shafts on the wet grass of the meadow. Lopez glanced furtively at Johnny's sober countenance. He saw no sign of enterprise there.

"If it is that I go to the señorita, and say that you sick — and need the bacon and the coffee —"

Johnny waved a negative to the suggestion.

"Then we wait," declared Lopez philosophically.

They waited. It was Lopez who first noticed the thin thread of smoke curling up from the cabin stovepipe. He stared at this unexpected indication of activity within the cabin. Johnny followed his gaze, his own face awakening with surprise. He had anticipated getting breakfast for all hands as soon as Grace Percival's appearance made the undertaking possible. "Of course, *she's* got to have warm water to wash with," he muttered scornfully.

A half-hour passed. The smoke from the stovepipe ascended in puffs, and in greater volume. Presently the thin, enticing aroma of coffee crept insidiously out across the keen morning air. Johnny glanced at Lopez. Lopez glanced at Johnny. The señorita was not altogether helpless, then? Mingled with the fragrance of coffee was the more substantial tang of frying bacon. And it was not yet six o'clock! Ordinarily Grace Percival took breakfast between eight and nine.

Presently a vision appeared on the cabin veranda; a slender being, golden-haired, fresh as the morning, graceful as the swaying of a young branch in the breeze. The cabin, the corral, and all the immediate surroundings became suddenly crude and primitive. Only the morning sunlight, framing the girl's head in an aura of coppery gold,

seemed friendly to her presence — all else was harsh and nakedly austere. It was then that Johnny realized that the girl, though in the country, was not of it — could never be of it as he had wished her to be. She liked the great vistas, the horses, the untamed spaciousness of it all, yet as a spectator, not as a part of it. And it was then he felt his selfishness and recognized vaguely that he was playing a small game, and not the big game which he thought he had been playing. And he resented the wound he had given his own pride, and because of the sting of it he bridled and balked at the prospect of turning from his chosen trail.

"Breakfast is ready," called Grace Percival. Her voice was neither overly cordial, nor frigid, but rather conveyed a plain statement of fact. Johnny felt embarrassed. Lopez felt hungry. Like two boys called by their mother to the morning table, they strode to the cabin.

Already the homely interior had taken on a different aspect. An indescribable tidiness was apparent in the arrangement of the meager furnishings. Plates, cups, knives, and forks were in orderly array on the little table. Two chairs invited, and a box, up-ended, served as a third seat. Lopez wished the young lady a gallant good-morning. Johnny mumbled a greeting, and stood waiting until Grace Percival had fetched the bacon and coffee from the stove. When the

oven disclosed a pan of hot biscuits, Johnny was dumbfounded. He had not even dreamed that the girl from the city had any domestic ability. He could not imagine her helping herself. She had always been served by others.

Without a trace of hesitancy she took her place at the table and ate of the coarse, substantial fare. Johnny's face betrayed a new interest in the individuality of his self-appointed hostess. Her poise he took for granted, but the graciousness of her dignity rather awed him. And how completely her expressive eyes masked all expression save a natural interest in the details of the meal. He could not believe that he had ever touched her hand, her lips. She seemed so utterly aloof from anything approaching friendly intimacy. He had imagined that he knew her. Now he realized that he had never known the real Grace Percival. His process of thought was not subtle, but intuitively direct. Nor could he know that he was falling in love with the real Grace Percival, and not with an ideal — a vision woman of fashionable gowns and social subtleties. He saw her as she was — a human being making the best of a difficult and rude situation without pose, without recourse to feminine wiles. She was beautiful. But what of that, now? She was real! She was — and he hesitated as he mentally framed the word — a thoroughbred!

Breakfast over, they rose. Lopez began to clear away the dishes. "I wash those dishes," he declared. It was the first word spoken since they sat at table.

"Then I'll dry them," said Grace Percival.

"I'll do that," said Johnny. "Frank, will you catch up Chico for me?"

"Si! I catch him."

As Lopez left the cabin, Johnny turned to Grace Percival. "I'm going down to Solano," he declared. "But first, I'm asking you if you will promise to marry me."

"No," she replied quietly. "You should not ask me. Can't you see —"

Johnny interrupted with a gesture. "I don't care when. I'll wait, if you'll just promise."

"And if I should promise — even while my guardian is dying in Chicago, and I am needed there — then I suppose you would say I could go?"

"That's what I would tell you."

"I can't promise. But I can go. You will not hinder me if I ask to go."

"You're fooling yourself about that."

"No, I am not. But why are you going to Solano. Isn't that an unnecessary risk, after last night?"

Johnny hesitated and flushed. "Oh, I'm going on down just to see how folks take the news of the hold-up. I'm interested."

"When will you come back?"

"You asked me that question once before — remember? Well, this time I aim to come back in two, three days, if I have luck. Lopez will do what you tell him. You can trust him. Nobody knows you're up here. When I get back I'm going to ask you the same question again."

"I suppose you realize what you are doing — what a position you have placed me in, because you love me?"

"I don't count that. All that counts, is *you.* I ain't good at arguing."

Grace Percival gazed at Johnny's troubled face, her own eyes filled with the light of that familiar, startled expression that both enraptured and enraged him. "Johnny," she said softly, "do you hate me, or do you really love me?"

"Both," he replied hesitatingly, held to answer honestly by the sincerity of her voice, her manner.

"Do you think I could live away up here, far from everybody and everything all my life? Can't you see that as you are now, and as I am now, it would be a dreadful mistake for us to marry?"

"I think you would be good at anything you tackled. But I didn't think so until this morning."

"No?"

Johnny nodded. "You set to and got that breakfast better than I could. You got all kinds of nerve to tackle anything. I know it, now.

Why, you would have rode that gray stallion if I'd let you. But I would never let you. I fetched him down, just to make good on what I promised. I would have turned him loose anyhow, later. I wasn't going to try to make a real saddle-horse out of him. To tame him would have meant to kill him — and he sure belonged up here, running wild with the mares and colts. I wouldn't have kept him, even if you had asked me to. That horse and I had a good battle. I couldn't break him right, ever. So he wins."

"Western standards?" and Grace Percival smiled.

"By God, no! Human standards — and I'm human, and so are you. And you're going to marry me if it takes a hundred years!"

"I wouldn't be quite so — so attractive, in a hundred years, Johnny.

"That ain't it," declared Johnny. "At first it was your looks, and your way of saying things. But now it's *you*. It don't matter now what you say, or what you do. Mebby you don't sabe what I mean, but you will."

And Johnny swung away abruptly and strode from the cabin. He dared not stay longer. He felt that he would have taken her in his arms, that he would have kissed her, held her close to him. Because he actually loved her, he did not. Yet he did not know why he had turned away.

With a word to Lopez, Johnny swung to the saddle and set out across the meadow, without a word, a gesture, or a glance of farewell. Grace Percival, standing in the doorway, watched him until he had disappeared within the far edge of the timber. Her heart held no scorn for him, no rebuke, but rather the pity of a mother for a wayward son. She saw clearly. And because she saw clearly, she knew that she could never be to him the woman that he thought she was.

When Lopez came and found her washing the dishes, he tried to make her understand that it was his work, but she shook her head as she cleaned plate and cup, knife and fork; so he took the dish-towel and dried the things clumsily, pleased with his unaccustomed task because of the companionship of a beautiful young woman, to him little less than a saint and considerably more, viewed from another angle.

Presently they were in the sunshine, Grace Percival seated on the edge of the narrow cabin veranda, and Lopez, his back against the logs of the cabin wall, smoking a cigarette and gesturing as he told her of the capture and the breaking of the gray stallion.

"But why," said Grace Percival as Lopez concluded, "did Johnny Trent try to break the horse when he knew he couldn't be tamed?"

Lopez shrugged his broad shoulders. "Quien

sabe? Johnny is like that. And I think he is learn something from those horse. But Juan, he don' go what you say, tame." Pausing, Lopez glanced across the wide meadow, his keen eyes catching a movement among the distant trees. He touched his lips with his finger. Grace Percival followed the direction of his eyes. She saw something emerge from the dark edge of the forest like a silver shadow. Then followed another moving shadow, and another. "Why," she whispered, "they are horses. They are —"

"What you say, wild. Si! Now they go — quick!"

The girl recognized the gray stallion by his color and poise. Even as she stared, the band halted, their heads lifted, and the shrill challenge of the stallion rippled across the still air. A flash and flicker of tossing manes and the band swung and disappeared within the dusk of the forest. Grace Percival sighed. The strange, primordial ecstasy passed. The unreal became real. Lopez was smiling. Past the opening of his shirt collar she saw the raw, red welt of a freshly healed wound. Blue flowers nodded in the meadow grass as a light breeze ran out across the clearing and, hesitating, became lost in the hush of the uplands.

CHAPTER XV

"With little to gain and much to lose,
And a dozen trails from which to choose,
The men of the mesas framed a plan,
To sit and wait for the hunted man."

DROPPING down from the high country to the ranchland around Solano, Johnny Trent jogged along, greeting an occasional rancher with a gesture or a brief word. Cutting across the unfenced acres near town, he tied his horse at the rail in front of Baker's store. Nodding to the clerk who was hosing down the store platform, Johnny entered the store and found Baker in his office opening the mail. Baker's manner was exceptionally formal as he glanced over his spectacles at Johnny and gestured significantly toward the office door. Johnny closed it and returned to the desk.

"I suppose you've heard the news?" said Baker.

Johnny shook his head.

Baker gave him a recent issue of "The Antelope News." The front page was headlined with two leading articles — the recent stage hold-up and the new oil project in the Petrified Forest.

"All kinds of excitement," declared Johnny.

"The oil people don't take it away from folks so quick, but they get more of it. But you can't believe everything you read."

"I'd hate to," said Baker, "especially as they mention your name in connection with the hold-up."

"Yes, I noticed that. The paper says Old Henry thought he recognized my voice. Funny what queer ideas some folks get when they have a little age on them. Have they found out what has become of Miss Percival yet?"

"No. There's a posse out from Antelope. I understand they're working this way."

"Thanks, Mr. Baker: but that needn't worry you any."

Baker, who had been casually glancing at his mail while he talked, swung round and faced Johnny. Baker's round, ruddy face was stern, his manner peremptory. "Why did you do it, Johnny?"

Johnny laughed. "So you fell in line with the rest of the Solano hay-tossers, eh? I reckon everybody on the flat is saying that Johnny Trent has turned outlaw and run off with that city woman. Well, Baker, you're a special deputy sheriff, and a game warden. I'm here. Bring on your bear-dogs."

"Johnny, why did you do it?"

"Well, judge, if I *had* done it, I might give you

two, three reasons. But you ain't produced any evidence, yet."

"No. But I can put two and two together —"

"That makes a crowd. Make it one and one."

"Besides," continued Baker, "I know you. You're not the same boy that bossed the road gang this summer."

"You said it! I'm a hundred years older."

"And if you choose to run wild — you know the finish."

Johnny waved a negative. "I don't figure to move a foot. All I came for was for the pay that's owing to me, and to settle my board-bill with Mrs. Johnson. I aim to stay in town two, three days. And seeing that you're a friend of mine, you might wire the posse that I'm here and I'll wait — but tell 'em to come heeled."

"A posse is usually heeled, John."

"And I've seen some of 'em fore-footed."

Baker turned back to his desk. "I had figured you as straight," he said feelingly, as he penciled a reckoning of Johnny's time on the road work. Baker made out a check and turned toward Johnny.

"You don't need to wear out your pencil figuring I ain't straight," said Johnny, ignoring the check. "I never robbed a man of a cent, cheated a Mexican, or lied to a woman. I wonder if some of the storekeepers in Arizona can say that?

'Course, I've done some horse-trading — but that's like running a store; the buyer's got to take what you give him, and he's lucky if it runs twelve to the dozen."

"Here's your check," said Baker. "You asked me for a job, once, riding for me, down on The Blue. I can use you, right away, if you want to go to work."

"Thanks, I can't tie up with you, just now. Anyway, ain't it against the rules to hire an outlaw?"

"Suit yourself," said Baker brusquely. "But if I were in your boots, I'd ride south — and keep going. And that's the last word I've got to say."

"Ain't a bad idea, at that. But I got my homestead up in the hills to look after. And do you think I'm going to let a two-page newspaper run me out of the country? Not this morning!"

"Seen Lopez, lately?" queried Baker.

"Yes. He's up to my place, looking after the stock."

"Did you just come from there?"

"Sure! That's where I live."

Baker turned back to his desk, shook his head, fumbled with the mail. Johnny jingled out of the store, crossed to Mrs. Johnson's, and, after a brief visit with that good woman — who assured him that she did not believe a single word that the papers had printed about him — he paid his

bill and departed, riding down the long gray road that led to Concho and beyond. Mrs. Johnson had said that she was dreadfully worried about Miss Percival's disappearance. Yet Mrs. Johnson was even more worried about Johnny Trent's appearance, shrewdly aware that he was in trouble, the cause of which she would not even allow herself to imagine.

Distressed by the hard look in Johnny's eyes, Mrs. Johnson made it her business, shortly after he left, to interview Baker. Mrs. Johnson had recourse to no subtleties. "Johnny is in trouble," she said, in the seclusion of Baker's office. Baker nodded. Mrs. Johnson was not pleased by so casual an acceptance of her declaration. "Maybe you know more about it than I do," continued Mrs. Johnson. "But I didn't come over here to find out, and I don't suppose there's anything that I can do to help. If there is, I'd like to know it."

"Johnny didn't seem to want any advice or help," declared Baker.

"Of course he didn't! What he needs now, is friends! You got money, Baker, and you got influence. You're the big man of this county. You think Johnny Trent held up that stage. I can see it in your eye. Now I know Johnny wouldn't do a thing like that. I wouldn't be surprised if that Percival woman was living right in Concho, or

Antelope, and just letting the papers make a sensation about her. Them society folks will do anything to get their name in the paper. Why, the idea of Johnny Trent kidnaping her! He —"

"Did he?"

Mrs. Johnson did her best to control her temper. "No matter what he did, he's got a home as long as I can keep a roof over my head."

"I tried to talk to him —" began Baker.

Mrs. Johnson sniffed. "Talk to him! If I was a man, I would saddle a horse and ride out there where he's gone. And if he was up to some devil-try, I'd stay right with him no matter what happened. If he wasn't, I'd just keep him company and say nothing. That boy is having a big fight with himself, Baker, or I don't know a cabbage from a squash."

Mrs. Johnson departed abruptly, and in the seclusion of her room wept silently, dried her tears, and felt better. Baker, for some reason or other, felt decidedly uncomfortable.

Riding slowly across the mesas, Johnny Trent communed with himself and was not pleased with the result. Johnny's mental attitude was somewhat like that of a small boy who, having wantonly broken a window in an abandoned house, because the original owner had been considered an enemy, stoops for another stone, yet hesitates

to justify the success of his first misdemeanor by breaking another window merely for the sake of hearing the glass tinkle.

Baker knew that he had held up the Solano stage — knew it with an absolute conviction requiring no evidence — and this irritated Johnny, even as the small boy is irritated when accused of window-breaking, knowing that no one actually saw him throw the stone. Too intent upon appearing casual under Baker's honest eyes, Johnny failed to see, or refused to see, the stout little storekeeper's real purpose in accusing him of the crime. As it was, Baker, his daughter Julia, whom Johnny had deliberately avoided, Mrs. Johnson, even Frank Lopez, were as vague figures in a background against which Grace Percival stood revealed as the one exquisite allurement, the being round which his every thought was shaped. Yet he was quite aware that the horsemen who were coming toward him were members of a posse; that he was the man they were searching for, and that in a few minutes he would meet them. They were from Antelope, and none among them knew him. The chief asked Johnny a few questions about the surrounding country and was about to ride on, when Johnny informed him that Baker was expecting a posse — that the storekeeper had mentioned it to him just before he left Solano.

"Know anything about this man Trent?" queried the chief deputy.

"Oh, I heard he was mixed up in the stage-robbery that everybody is talking about. He hangs around Solano a whole lot."

"Seen him lately?"

"Why, he was in, talking to Baker, about an hour ago. He didn't seem worried a whole lot."

"Well, there's five thousand reward for him, and five thousand more for the man that finds where that young lady from Chicago is. Might pay you to keep your eye peeled."

"Thanks. I'll do that. You can save time by cutting straight across the mesa toward those cottonwoods. So-long."

Johnny continued along the Concho road for an hour, then turned and cut across the mesa toward Solano. He had ridden out of town with no definite intent, save that he did not wish to be in Solano when the posse arrived. And he returned to Solano because his presence there might deter them from riding up to his homestead. Baker was the big man in Solano and the deputies would naturally look to him for information. But first they would put up their horses and have supper. Johnny took his time, riding slowly. He entered town through the Mexican quarter, and turned his horse into Lopez's corral. He had supper with Mrs. Lopez and her five unusually silent

children. It was seldom that a guest sat at their table. After supper Johnny gave Mrs. Lopez a twenty-dollar bill — more money than her husband had ever given her from his earnings — and assured her that Frank was in good health and would return to his own fireside before long. About eight, that evening, Johnny sent the eldest Lopez youngster over to Baker's for some tobacco and cigarette papers. The store usually closed at six. The boy returned with the tobacco and all the candy he could purchase for two-bits, and told his mother that some big men with guns were in the store talking to the patron in that little room where he kept all his money. Johnny stepped out, and as a precaution saddled his horse and left him tied outside the corral. Keeping within the shadows he skirted the town and made his way to the high-fenced yard back of Baker's. The big double gate fronting the alley was locked. Johnny jumped, caught the top, and swung over. He made his way cautiously among the crates, boxes, and barrels, toward the lighted window of the office. The window was heavily barred, but the wooden shutters were open. The back door was closed. Johnny crept up, keeping out of the light, and seated himself directly under the window on the ground. He heard the clink of glasses and Baker's voice reproving some one for declining a second glass of the best

whiskey in town. Because of the high desk back from the window, Johnny could not see the persons whom Baker was entertaining; but he could hear distinctly, and it was not long before he recognized the voice of the deputy who had talked with him on the Concho road. He was asking questions about water, trails, and grazing. Baker's answers were direct and comprehensive. Johnny experienced a peculiar thrill when one of the men mentioned his name and asked where he was supposed to live. And he heard Baker describe the homestead and the way to it with what seemed to be painstaking accuracy. Then the chief deputy, with a casual drawl, asked who this man Trent was and what kind of an hombre was he, anyway?

"A pretty lively boy," was Baker's reply.

"Heard that, in Antelope. But what kind of a reputation has he got in this section?"

"The best in the world. He worked for me this summer, and he can't be beat when it comes to handling men."

"Now that's curious!" said another voice. "We got it that he was kind of a wild bird. You say he was in town this afternoon?"

"Yes. He came in to see me and I gave him his pay. He said he would be in town two or three days. I haven't seen him this evening."

"Bluff, most likely," said the chief deputy.

"Perhaps. I advised him to ride south, and keep going," declared Baker.

"Knowing we was on our way here? Well, Baker, that ain't what I'd call friendly to Uncle Sam. There's a deputy United States marshal on the job, right now. 'Course *he* ain't after any reward money." There was a pause, which Johnny interpreted as a gentle insinuation that the posse was after the money as well as the man. Then the voice in the office continued: "But you had a right to tell young Trent to vamose — at that. You must have figured he done the job, or you wouldn't have advised him to pull his freight."

"I didn't want to see him get into trouble, whether he did the job or not," declared Baker. "You see, he'll be a hard man to handle if he's cornered. Now, question for question. What evidence have you that Johnny Trent held up the Solano stage?"

"Why, Old Henry says he recognized his voice. Then, it seems that this man Trent and that young woman from Chicago knew each other pretty well. It was a queer deal — his making away with the woman and not making any play to rob the mail."

"Queer enough. And when it comes to a showdown, I wonder if the Government or the county has a case against him. As I understand it, somebody stopped the stage between here and Con-

cho, told Old Henry to climb down along with Miss Percival, and then ordered Old Henry to get back in the rig again. Something frightened the team and they started to run, with Old Henry in the rig and the young woman standing beside the road. When Henry and the Concho constable went back to look for Miss Percival she had disappeared. The inference is that she was kidnaped by the bandit. But there seems to be no evidence that his intention was to rob the mail, or interfere with it in any way, or rob either the driver or the passenger. Besides, I understand from Old Henry that the highwayman did not molest him, or even lay a finger on him or the contents of the stage. Technically, Miss Percival was a passenger on the Solano stage. The revenue derived from passengers reverts to me as the owner of the stage line. The passenger business is incidental to carrying the mail. As owner of the stage line I am personally responsible for the safety of passengers, and for the safe delivery of the mail. Even suppose you did arrest Johnny Trent, it would be a difficult matter to prove that he held up the stage, and you could hardly prove that he robbed the mail or the passengers. I am trying to view the matter impersonally. By the way, did you pick up any tracks down around Concho?"

"That's the worst of it!" declared another voice. "We cut sign that said three hosses was

used in the hold-up, and we trailed 'em clean to the flats south of Concho. That storm that hit us just after we left Antelope washed out the tracks on the flats. Never did pick 'em up again."

"Then you think that the highwaymen rode south from Concho?"

"Started south. Maybe swung off east or west, later."

"Three horses?"

"Yes."

"Then," queried Baker, "which one of the three held up the stage? Old Henry says one man did, and he thinks he recognized Johnny Trent's voice."

"Well," came the voice of the chief deputy, "somebody did. Just what does this young Trent look like, anyhow?"

Johnny, squatting beneath the window, felt considerable interest in the reply. Would Baker describe him fairly — and his horse? Or would he try to mislead the posse with a false description. Baker's answer was deliberate and accurate.

"Why," said the deputy, "we met a quiet-spoken young hombre on the way over, that fills your description to the muzzle! And he was ridin' a little bay cow-hoss with a white star in his forehead, and one white foot. Now if that was young Trent —"

"Might have been," said Baker. "He's not the kind to cut and run just because of a little dust. He's young, but don't you make any mistake about his being full-grown. I'd hate to see any of you boys get hurt."

"I'll take a chance — for five thousand," declared a voice.

Johnny edged from beneath the window and rising made for the back fence. Presently he was knocking at Old Henry Watkins's door. That he rapped on the door with the muzzle of his six-shooter is merely a matter of record. Possibly he didn't want to get any slivers in his knuckles. It was the lay-over day for the stage. The old man was not at the cantina. Johnny had investigated the cantina.

Old Henry, in undershirt, pants, and stockinged feet, answered the summons. His eyeglasses were pushed up on his forehead. He had been proudly perusing "The Antelope News" and regaling himself with the account of the hold-up, in which he was described as "a splendid example of the coolness and courage which marked that fast-disappearing type, the old frontiersman, who, although in the sere and yellow, and enfeebled by weight of years and a lifelong battle with the elements, still clung to the noble traditions of the historic past." It sounded good to Old Henry, although he disliked the

word "yellow" and the only "sere" he knew about was the "sear" in the mechanism of a six-shooter.

"I want you to come over to Baker's with me," said Johnny, and because Old Henry seemed so utterly amazed at this mild request, Johnny punctuated the sentence with the muzzle of his gun. "And don't yip, or I'll just naturally drill you," continued Johnny. "Never mind your boots. Don't worry about your feet. It's your head you want to think about. Come on!"

Old Henry stammered and stuttered and boiled internally, but, as on a similar occasion, he recognized a business man when he heard his voice.

Johnny escorted Old Henry across the street and deviously round to the back of Baker's store. Old Henry protested that the grit hurt his feet — but he kept on going. "And now you can step up and knock, and Baker will ask you what you want. Tell him you have something important to unload, and he'll let you in. I'll be right behind you. It'll be dark, *but he'll recognize your voice.*"

Old Henry groaned. He was paying a heavy price for "The Antelope News" eulogy. Wrath and helplessness made him groan — not fear. He proved an expert pupil under the tuition of that peremptory instructor Mr. Colt.

He rapped on the back door. "I want to see you a minute, Mr. Baker," he quavered.

"That you, Henry?"

"Yes, it's me."

"All right," came Baker's voice. Footsteps sounded on the board floor as the storekeeper strode across the office. The spring lock clicked.

"Somethin' mighty important," declared Old Henry as Baker opened the door. Old Henry's unconventional attire substantiated the statement. He stepped into the room, blinking in the strong light.

"It's all right," said Baker as Old Henry stared round at the posse. "Glad you came over. The boys here may want to ask you a few questions about —"

"Johnny Trent," said Johnny as he stepped in and shoved Old Henry to one side. Johnny's right arm lay on the top of the high desk. Beyond it sat the four horsemen whom he had met that afternoon. The four horsemen stared intently at Johnny's right hand, the thumb and forefinger of which were held in a technically correct position on trigger and hammer. Crystal-gazing isn't in it with the hypnotic influence of the polished ring surrounding the bore of an adequate six-gun. "Lay 'em on the desk — one at a time," invited Johnny, and the four horsemen accepted the invitation with a quiet alacrity that

was eloquent of former experiences, similar and sad. Not that they were fear-driven. They were simply sensible, and wished to live a few years longer. The four members of the posse, rosy with good liquor and the heat of the evening, retired from the desk with their eight hands aloft as though feeling for that old, proverbial clothesline invisible to the average eye.

"Sit down," said Johnny, with genial intonation. "You, too, Baker."

The posse resumed their chairs, and sighed as one man. This young Trent was exceedingly business-like and bland. His nerves were under control. An indescribable directness of purpose emanated from him like the steady heat from a steam radiator that may not look hot, but is. It was evident to the posse that he was a good workman in this special line, and whatever he did he would not bungle. Inversely, the posse decided, as one man, that they wouldn't, either.

Johnny gestured to Baker to sit down. "Sorry to break up the meeting, Mr. Baker, but she's broke. And" — Johnny turned his head slightly — "if any of you goats think I'm kidding, just butt in — and I'll do the rest. Mr. Baker, you're foreman of this jury. Henry, you can take the stand — and keep standing. Me — I aim to play both lawyers. All you man-chasers got to do is to listen. If your ear itches, don't scratch it. I'm

feeling kind of suspicious, to-night. All set to go? Well, I'm Johnny Trent, post-office, Solano, Arizona, general delivery. White, unmarried, and in my right mind. Age and politics none of your dam' business. Now we'll open the tomatoes."

Baker, naturally resenting this intrusion from a social standpoint, if for no other reason, eyed Johnny sternly. "Trent, this is a mighty serious matter — forcing entrance to a man's private office under arms, and disarming and insulting officers of the law."

"You're right," said Johnny. "It's serious, or I wouldn't be here. Just how serious depends on just how quiet your friends keep. As for forcing my way in, you're wrong. Henry Watkins here asks to get in, and you let him. He could have told you I was with him. You can settle that with Henry. Push your chair back from the desk, Mr. Baker. Now let's start right. I'm the man that the papers say held up the stage down near Concho, recent, when a lady, riding on the stage, disappeared and ain't been heard of since. That's what the papers say. I was outside, under the window, listening to what you deputies had to say to Baker, and what he said to you, quite a spell before I invited Henry to step in and tell his story. My name was mentioned frequent, and, judging by what you all said, you

gentlemen came down here to Solano to see what I look like. Well, take a good look. Now I'm going to ask Henry a few questions. He can answer, or not, just as he sees fit. Henry, did you tell the sheriff in Antelope that I held you up?"

Old Henry gazed at the deputies, then at Baker, who nodded. "Not first off," said Henry. "I said first, *somebody* held me up. Then I got to thinkin', and I said to Sheriff Hawley that I thought I recognized your voice when you ast me if I had any cash on the stage."

"You *thought* you recognized my voice? Was it dark when this hold-up was pulled off?"

"Middlin' dark. I could see as fur as the horses' heads."

"Could you describe the horse the bandit rode?"

"Well, not exact. Kind of a dark hoss, mebby a bay or a sorrel."

"Or a buckskin, or chestnut, or a dark gray?" Johnny nodded encouragingly to the chief witness.

"Might 'a' been. It was middlin' dark."

"And your eyesight is middling poor. Could you see the bandit's face?"

"Nope. When he come up clost I seen he had somethin' over his face — a handkerchief, or somethin'."

"How was he dressed?"

"Like any puncher — shirt and pants and boot and hat."

"So all you had to go by was his voice?"

"Not first off. Later, I got to think his voice sounded mighty like yourn. And seein' as how you made that young woman git down from the rig, kind of like you was acquainted, I knowed you and her was friends."

"Would you go on the witness stand and swear that I was the man that held you up?"

Old Henry fidgeted, combed his beard with his bony fingers, gazed helplessly at the posse, at Baker, at Johnny's face, and then his eyes took on a crafty expression. "You're forcin' me to talk, at the point of a gun. That ain't like it would be in a law court."

"All right! Now I'm giving my word, with Baker to witness, that you can say anything you like, and I won't lift a finger to harm you, now, or later. What I want to know is — would you go on the witness stand and swear that I held you up, just because you thought you recognized my voice?"

"I told Sheriff Hawley that I thought it was your voice," said Old Henry weakly.

"And you imagined the rest, eh?"

Old Henry bristled, recalling his struggle with the runaway team. "It was no imaginin' about my hosses dog-gone near ditchin' me and the

whole outfit. And it wasn't no imaginin' when me and the constable come back and looked for that young woman, and she wan't there."

"Could you prove to a jury that the woman didn't fall out of the rig when your horses ran away?"

"I sure could! She was standin' alongside the road when I clumb in, and you — er — the hold-up — hits the off hoss with his quirt, and we started north on the jump."

"Did you have hold of the reins?"

"Nope — dog-gone it! I didn't git holt of them reins till we hit the turn goin' into Concho."

"Then you were pretty busy trying to stop the team?"

"I can take my oath to that!"

"Then, seeing it was dark, and you were busy trying to stop the horses, how do you know your passenger wasn't on the seat beside you and was thrown out?"

"They was nobody in the seat when the team started," declared Old Henry.

"I thought you said you were?"

Old Henry combed his beard rapidly. "'Course I was settin' in the seat, or how could I'd stopped the team?"

Johnny gestured. "Stand over there, Henry. Now one of you members of this here jury tie a handkerchief over your face and step behind the

desk and stoop down so the witness can't see you. What? Contempt of court? I'd ask you, Mr. Baker, only Henry knows your voice."

"You can't prove anything by that method," declared Baker.

"I'm going to," asserted Johnny.

"That's all right," said the chief deputy, willing to do as Johnny requested, thinking that he might trap him into some careless admission of his guilt. He tied a bandanna over his mouth and nose and stood up. Johnny reached over the desk and pushed the roll-top down. The catch clicked. The deputies' guns were in a safe place for the present. With his left hand Johnny pulled up the bandanna on his own neck until it covered his nose and mouth. "Don't anybody make a move, or he'll need a coroner and a couple of shovels," advised Johnny as he stepped behind the desk with the chief deputy. They stooped. Then from behind the desk came a voice. "Tell the court what you want the prisoner to say."

Old Henry hesitated. Then, "Say, 'Put up your hands.'"

"Put up your hands," came in muffled tones from behind the desk.

"That was him!" exclaimed Old Henry. "I'd know his voice anywhere."

"Whose voice?" queried Johnny, and he and the deputy came from behind the desk.

"Why, yourn! I could tell it in a minute!"

"You slipped up on that," declared the deputy. "I did all the talking."

Old Henry stammered, swore, vowed that he had been tricked. He babbled along, like an idler pulley on a shaft, but no one paid any attention to him.

Johnny backed slowly toward the rear door. "And now what do you think a smart lawyer would do to your chief witness, if you took me to Antelope to stand trial?" he queried sharply. "I don't want trouble with any of you folks, but I aim to stay right here in Solano till I get ready to leave. If you think you want to take me in on the evidence you got, come over to the cantina and get me. Only, get Baker to give you your guns — for you'll need 'em!"

Johnny reached behind him and opened the door. He lowered his gun-hand, knowing that the unarmed posse would hardly risk rushing him.

Then his hand came up like a flash of light. The roar of the heavy gun and darkness were all but instantaneous.

In the succeeding silence some one struck a match.

"The son-of-a-gun shot the light out!" exclaimed one of the deputies.

"No," said Baker, turning on a side-light near

the door. "He nipped the wire. I've always understood he was a pretty fair shot."

The shaded bulb which had hung above Baker's desk lay in fragments on the office floor, with a scant foot of cord attached to the socket. The deputies, Baker, and Old Henry gazed at the dangling wire above the desk.

Baker turned to his visitors. "He said he'd be at the cantina, this evening. He'll be there. He said he expected to stay in Solano two or three days. He'll stay. And while it is none of my business why or how he leaves, I don't believe anything will be gained by trying to hurry him."

"Baker," said the chief deputy, "did you frame this little party? It looks like you were pretty strong for this young Trent."

"I'll accept that as a compliment, as you are my guests. No, I didn't frame it. I couldn't have done better, though. Perhaps Henry can enlighten you."

Old Henry shook his head like a dog with a burr in its ear. "If Johnny Trent didn't hold up the stage and run off with that young woman, nobody did."

"If he did, he's just slick enough to get out of it," declared the chief deputy. "That boy ain't naturally bad. He's just wild."

"But that don't explain about the missin' woman," said a deputy.

"If he don't know where she is, nobody does," declared Old Henry.

"You might ask him," suggested the chief. "He might recognize your voice." Old Henry glared at the posse.

"If you are at all unsatisfied about my position," said Baker, restraining a tendency to resent the chief deputy's insinuation, "here are your guns."

Baker unlocked the roll-top desk. "Johnny Trent hasn't left town. He's at the cantina. He said he'd wait for you. Nothing could be fairer than that."

The chief shook his head.

"I ain't so sure young Trent is the man we want," he declared, glancing at his companions. "Mr. Watkins kind of weakened on his evidence."

Old Henry blinked and combed his beard. "Mebby he ain't," said Old Henry, arching his shaggy eyebrows like the village preacher who accepts a premise with intent to subtly controvert it, "but he would make a pert little substitute, wouldn't he?"

"You talk like he was a friend of yours," said the chief.

"I ain't so durned sure he ain't," asserted Old Henry. "And seein' as how you let him slip through your fingers after I done fetched him

over here, I'm through givin' evidence ag'in' him. You can help yourself to the chile."

"*You* fetched him over!" snorted the chief.

"He come over with me, didn't he?" Old Henry arched his eyebrows again.

The deputy turned toward Baker. "We'll use your corral. It's handier than the livery. And thanks — for the whiskey. See you in the morning."

The posse decided to remain in Solano for a day or so, to rest tired horses and incidentally keep an eye on the movements of Johnny Trent. The chief was not at all sure that Johnny was innocent of holding up the stage. Johnny had shown himself capable, nervy, and a good shot. Later, when it became generally known that the posse was in Solano for the purpose of shadowing Johnny, public feeling veered from dubious head-shakings of suspicion toward outspoken friendliness for him, whose presence in town attested his innocence. Moreover, Johnny had always been popular. Solano was not pleased that officers from Antelope should camp in its peaceful preserves. Tribal instinct came to the surface. The old primordial hatred of law in evidence on the streets seethed in the simple hearts of Solano folk. While an individual may like and respect a policeman, the mob does not. The deputies were fed and housed at Mrs. Johnson's; and while

Mrs. Johnson scorned them and their mission, they were treated with courtesy so unusual that they suspected that good woman of concealing a method beneath her mildness. Otherwise, and abroad in Solano, they were left strictly to their own devices.

CHAPTER XVI

"When in Rome, let the other fellow do the talking." (From Gene Rhodes, "Cigarette Papers.")

SAMUEL PERCIVAL'S arrival in Antelope caused no visible excitement, in fact hardly rippled the slow current of Antelope's placid existence. Mr. Percival, of Chicago, interviewed the editor of the local paper, who, after a brief conversation with the broker, concluded that the latter was not worth the labor of setting up a notice of his arrival, especially when Percival upbraided him for not having run extensive advertisements of the reward for information as to the whereabouts of Grace Percival. The editor calmly explained that the first account of the hold-up, and a subsequent notice of the reward, had created all the interest possible to create in a community that spread news by word of mouth faster than print could travel. Mr. Percival, observing that the lank editor was not particularly impressed by his arrival, stated acrimoniously that he could buy the paper and never miss the money. The editor acknowledged that he could, for a nickel a throw.

Mr. Percival blustered out of the editor's office and hunted up the sheriff. The sheriff was cool, calm, collected. He informed his visitor

that a posse was out riding the country and would continue to do so as long as there was the least clue to follow.

"It's a big country to cover," he added. "We have wired every railroad town within a hundred miles. All we can do now is to wait and see what turns up."

"How much does the county pay you for holding down that chair?" queried the broker, irritated by the other's placidity.

"A whole lot more than I'm worth," replied the sheriff genially. "But you know how that is, being in politics yourself."

"You're a poor judge of men," asserted Percival.

"Honest? Then I'll guess again. You're in the milk business."

"Milk business! Where do you get that funny stuff?"

"Well, your eyes water when you try to look square at a man."

Percival stared at the sheriff's bronzed face and steel-gray eyes. The sheriff gazed mildly at his fat and flushed visitor. Samuel Percival had always had a political pull in Chicago — but somehow or other, he felt small and helpless facing this quiet little man of the mesa country. "I could buy your whole blasted county!" he declared with a contemptuous wave of his arm.

"I can sell you a couple of sections, right now!" said the sheriff enthusiastically. "I've got a ranch down near Concho —"

"This is an outrage!" thundered the broker. "Here I

"No — it's a ranch. Finest piece of grazing land, with water — four wells, and fifty acres in alfalfa. Ever hear of Concho. Well, it's a —"

"I suppose a mere five thousand dollars reward doesn't interest you enough to make you quit kidding and get down to business. The fact that the stage was held up and my ward murdered doesn't seem to bother you much."

"I know who held up the stage," declared the sheriff quietly. "But Miss Percival was not murdered."

"Then I suppose you know where she is?"

"No. I wish I did. But I'm reasonably sure that she has not been harmed in any way. I understand you telegraphed her that you were seriously injured in an automobile accident — wasn't expected to live? You look in pretty good health right now."

"My private affairs don't concern you, Mr. Sheriff. I'm out here to find out where Miss Percival is, and I intend to find out, if it costs twenty thousand, instead of ten. There's something crooked about this hold-up deal. If you know who held up the stage, why don't you get

busy and pinch him? There's more than one way to make him talk."

"My chief deputy will use his own judgment about that, Mr. Percival. In discussing your profession, your appearance, and real estate, I am only following your lead. About the first thing you asked me was how much I was paid to hold down this chair. If you really want to talk business, I'll listen. Or suppose *you* listen, and learn a few things about this country. You may have noticed that it's pretty open and roomy around here. And there isn't a policeman on every corner. In fact there aren't many corners between here and Solano. It takes time and patience to trail a law-breaker in this section. My boys are doing all that can be done."

"How far is this town of Solano from here, anyway?" queried the broker, as he lighted a cigar and deliberately ignored the sheriff as a man who might smoke. The sheriff rolled a cigarette.

"Oh, about a hundred miles, south."

"When's the next train?"

"There's no train — just the stage."

"Stage, eh? Hell of a note! How long does it take the stage?"

"About two days, in good weather. Relay at Concho, and McAllister's ranch."

"When does the stage leave here?"

"To-morrow morning, at six, if the mail is on time."

"You mean to say I can't get out of this burg till to-morrow morning?"

"I wouldn't say that. You can take the westbound at four-thirty this afternoon for Los Angeles. Some mighty interesting country round Los Angeles. Or you can take the eight-ten for Kansas City and Chicago, this evening. You could hire a rig at the livery — but you wouldn't make any better time than the stage that carries the mail, and relays about every thirty-five miles."

"I'll just hunt up that stage driver. I guess I can show him something that will make him get a move on."

"You might. But, you see, Mr. Percival, he carries for Uncle Sam, and he's some fussy about sticking to his regular run. Number Eight, westbound, drops a sack here at four-thirty, to-morrow morning. Old Henry — that's the driver — leaves here at six."

"Then I guess it's the hotel for me, if you got one in this dump."

"Sure we got one — a little one — with windows in it, and a door, and no extra charge for going up and down stairs. The rooms on the north are cooler."

"You're some comedian, now, ain't you!"

snorted Percival. "You ought to be on the stage."

"You mean I ought to have been a few nights ago. Glad I wasn't, for I would have missed meeting you to-day. And now that you have a little time to spare — and Miss Percival's disappearance *is* a serious matter — suppose you give me all the information about her you can, instead of finding fault with my office and criticizing my methods, in a country you know nothing about. Suppose you forget that you're rich, and that I'm poor, and take me for just what I am — sheriff of Antelope County, with no strings attached. And remember — I'd do just as much for a Mexican section-hand as I would for you. If you'll just hang on to that idea, we'll get along fine."

"You mean the reward I offered don't cut any ice with you?" suggested Percival.

"Not with me, personally. It does with my office. The boys will work harder and longer, with a little money in sight. If my boys find Miss Percival, they get the money. My office gets the credit. The credit is worth more to me in the long run than the money, or any share of it."

"That's all right," declared Percival. "But I can make it worth your while to put more men on the job — and speed this thing up."

The sheriff shook his head. "There's a deputy United States marshal on the job now. The

stage carried mail. Four of my men are down toward Solano, whipsawing that country. Baker of Solano sent word that he has instructed his boys on The Blue to be on the lookout. And there ain't a rancher between here and the mountains that ain't just as anxious to find five thousand dollars as his neighbor is. More men from here would only be an additional expense, and they wouldn't accomplish anything more than the men now on the job. Miss Percival is alive, and she'll be found, sooner or later."

"But suppose she was murdered?"

"If I thought that, I'd be out on the job myself. I'm here — if that is any consolation to you. Besides, the man that held up the stage is not a murderer — but he's a fighter. If he's cornered, he'll fight. If he isn't cornered, he'll tell where Miss Percival is, some day."

"That's all right. But I suspect you've got something up your sleeve. You say you know who held up the stage. I suppose that is none of my business."

"It wouldn't do any good if I told you, and it might do harm. There are occasions when money has to mark time, Mr. Percival. This is one of those times. It's a warm day. Suppose we step across the street and get something for it?"

"Most sensible thing you've said yet." Percival was beginning to feel the need of a little

internal support. He was unaccustomed to altitude — although Antelope is a mere six thousand feet — and never before had he imbibed soda-water raised to the *n*th degree by a discriminating drug-clerk. Like most dry sections, Arizona is wet in spots.

The apparently innocent beverage stole a march on him, so to speak. He became loquacious, jovial, patronizing — superficially a good fellow. When they returned to the sheriff's office, the little brown-visaged man with the steel-gray eyes studied the broker as one would study some playful leviathan disporting itself on dry land when its natural habitat is the ocean. Percival talked of his money, his motors, his house, his business, his influence in Chicago: and he hinted lightly of occasional escapades — but not once did he mention Miss Percival's name. Sheriff Hawley smoked and listened politely, his first impression of the broker confirmed beyond all doubt. Corn whiskey and soda-water combined may not be a technically honest drink, but it has enough specific gravity to float a modicum of truth. The sheriff eventually escorted his visitor, who needed an escort — to the hotel with the windows and doors and stairway — and left him explaining to the proprietor what a great man he was, and that he wanted the best room in the house, with a bath.

CHAPTER XVII

"I've woke up and found a rattler coiled on my blankets, and felt oneasy until I had shook him off and stomped on him. But when I see a coward with a gun on him, I get plumb scared." (Indigo Pete.)

BENDER and his companion, Hartshorn, dropped down from Utah through the Hopi country with a killing charged against them. They rode tired horses and swung wide of settlements, living as best they could on the charity of a chance Navajo sheep-herder until they reached Antelope, where they arrived late at night and where they found brief sanctuary in the adobe of a man whom they had known in the north. They hinted at splitting the loot they carried, ate wolfishly, and in payment for hospitality left their worn-out animals in exchange for two belonging to their host, with the covert threat that if he talked they would shoot him on sight. And he knew that they would, provided they were not captured and jailed before they reached the Mexican border.

Consequently, their arrival and departure were not advertised. They left before daybreak and headed south, skirting the highway to avoid leaving a plain trail. At dawn they camped in a deep arroyo. Bender slept while Hartshorn, a lank, tow-headed, pale-eyed cow-hand from

Wyoming, kept first watch. Bender's swarthy, broad face, unshaven cheeks, and matted black hair were not beautiful to gaze upon, as he lay on his back, snoring heavily. Hartshorn experienced a sudden hatred for the companion with whom he had risked so much. He turned from looking at Bender and gazed across the mesas, sitting as motionless as an Indian sentinel. Occasionally he smoked a cigarette. When the noon sun warmed the arroyo, he strode down and touched the sleeping man with his boot. Bender sat up quickly, his look of apprehension changing to one of disgust as he glanced up at the sun, roundabout at the bleak arroyo, and finally at the two horses moving restlessly on their stake-ropes.

Neither man spoke. Each saddled, tightened cinchas, and mounted. They struck south again, keeping a course some two miles west of the road, and scanning the surrounding country for sign of a ranch or homestead. In two hours they had reached the first water-hole south, where they paused only long enough to drink and water their horses. They would not have risked traveling in daytime had they not known that the great mesa between Antelope and Concho was all but uninhabited. They ran the risk of meeting some chance cow-hand or sheep-herder, but that risk they were willing to take for the sake of making time to the border.

Late that afternoon, after pushing their horses steadily, they drew up within sight of Concho, foot-roped their horses and allowed them to graze while they waited for dusk. They planned buying extra provisions at Concho, the last town they would risk visiting until they were safely across the range and in the Tonto Valley. They would swing wide of Solano, the natural gateway to the southern hills. Their usual procedure was for one to drift quietly into a town while the other stayed in camp, taking turns at purchasing supplies. It was Bender's turn to ride in. He caught up his horse, and when night settled over the mesa he rode 'cross country toward the town, arriving just as the Antelope mail stage pulled up at the store platform. His covert glance slid over the roped mail sacks, the old bearded driver, and the stout and impressive figure of Samuel Percival, in long linen duster. Mr. Percival's rotundity and his general appearance suggested money. Bender strode into the store, bought provisions, and dropped them in a gunnysack, and strode out, mounting his horse just as Percival asked Old Henry Watkins where the hotel was.

"Ain't none," declared Old Henry. "Just rooms in that there 'dobe acrost the street. Here is where you take what you git, and your money won't git you any more than what you see. This here is Concho. It ain't Chicago."

Bender reined round and drifted away in the night. He judged that the fat man had money; also that the stage driver did not like the fat man.

Hartshorn was waiting on a ridge a short way from his horse, which he had saddled. "What rig was that dusted into town?" he queried.

"Stage. Fat guy lookin' for a hotel."

After eating they rode to the edge of the mesa town, watered their horses, and again struck south. Two hours out from Concho they fed their tired animals the corn Bender had purchased, and later allowed them to graze on the short grass until midnight. Hartshorn knew that a break was inevitable — Bender's sullen silence indicating that he was planning some oblique move from their present course. Finally he spoke.

"That night-rider that stuck up the stage and took the woman has got the name. We can use it."

"Not me!" said Hartshorn. "We played in luck this far. I'll stick to the brush."

"Then here's where we split. When I want company I can pick up another yellow dog, 'most anywhere."

Hartshorn swallowed the insult, laughed and strode over to his horse. "Well, let's get going," he said as though satisfied with Bender's plan to hold up the stage. He waited until Bender was

stooping to untie the hobbles, then mounted swiftly and struck into a lope. He was not afraid of Bender, but he would not risk a quarrel, there in the dark. Bender was quite capable of shooting him in the back. As for Bender himself, he cared little enough where Hartshorn went or what became of him. They had been close companions, but never friends. Together they had fled from a common enemy, the law, and successfully. When they felt that they were comparatively safe, they began to hate and distrust each other; sullenly brooding animals, bound to fight or separate in the long run. It was merely a matter of time when each would pay the penalty. In fact no man may escape the retribution following deliberate murder, even though society does not capture and punish him.

Bender had determined to hold up the stage, single-handed, surmising that the fat man, evidently from Chicago, had considerable money with him. Several miles north of Solano, Bender concealed himself in an arroyo near the road, waiting for dawn and the arrival of the stage. Hartshorn, riding swiftly, made for the hills. Daylight found him well within the shelter of the timberlands.

About two hours after sunrise the stage rattled down the slope which approached the end of the draw where Bender was concealed. Samuel

Frank Joseph Cechvala,
Box 540,
Ford City, Pa.
FRY

Percival, heavy-eyed from lack of sleep, and in an ill temper, lurched to the unaccustomed swing of the buckboard, while Old Henry Watkins, with a loaded shotgun beside his leg, held the team to the road, and covertly enjoyed the discomfort of Mr. Percival. Old Henry did not anticipate a reappearance of the bandit, whom he still believed to be Johnny Trent, but his recent experience both on the road and in Baker's office had awakened his old-time caution. As carrier of the mail he was entitled to protect himself and his cargo. Some one in Antelope had said that as carrier of the mails he was all right, but as a carrier of females he was not a shining success. He resented the insinuation that he was too old to fight; hence the loaded shotgun.

Bender jumped his horse out of the draw and in front of the team before Old Henry realized that there was any one within ten miles of him. The horses shied. Old Henry pulled them to a standstill.

"You fat man," said Bender, "just light down."

Percival, whose brain was still heavy from lack of sleep and fatigue, hesitated.

"You better light down," advised Old Henry. "He's done stuck us up again."

The transition from stupor to panic was swift. Percival's eyes grew wild, his hand shook. His

first impulse was to speak — to argue, to tell who he was and try to bluff it out. Bender realized that the fat man was utterly unnerved. He didn't count. The outlaw's attention was focused on Old Henry, who was cool and consequently more likely to make some unexpected move.

"I'm having no trouble with you," said Bender, indicating Old Henry. "You can drive on while I talk to the fat man."

Bender was so sure of his game that he overlooked the chance of an exception to the rule: that a panic-stricken man sometimes fights like a cornered wolf. Percival's bulk and clumsiness, as he half-rose as though to alight, also served to mask the broker's desperate intent. Percival grabbed frantically for the shotgun, jerked it up, and crouched as he was, fired both barrels blindly. The team lunged into a gallop. Percival was pitched out. Old Henry lay back on the reins as the team swerved from the road and swept crashing through the scattered brush. Finally he brought the careening buckboard to a stop and glanced back. The outlaw's riderless horse was running in a circle with reins dragging. The figure of a stout man in a linen duster was just rising from the roadside.

"Got him, by gravy!" snorted Old Henry as he swung the team round and drove back.

Percival was walking up and down, rubbing

his shoulder and cursing. The shotgun lay in the ditch. Across the road, limp and motionless, lay the figure of the outlaw. A glance assured Old Henry that there was nothing to fear from that quarter. Percival's wild bombardment had literally blown off the top of the outlaw's head.

Pacing up and down, Percival groaned and clutched his shoulder.

"Guess we'll have to pack this here carcass into town," said Old Henry, gesturing. "Just lend a hand."

Percival stopped walking and gazed at the figure on the ground. "My God! I killed him!" he groaned.

"What was you aimin' to do?" queried Old Henry.

Percival, realizing that he had actually killed a man, and yet unable to recall just how it had happened, turned and began to walk back toward Concho. "Here! Where you headin' for?" called Old Henry. "You gone loco?"

The broker stopped, turned back, walking slowly. "Is he dead?" he whispered, licking his lips.

"Dead as they make 'em in this country. You sure spread his brains a plenty. Quit feelin' sad for yourself, and lend a hand. We got to pack this here carcass into town and report to the coroner."

"Don't ask me to touch that thing!" wailed Percival. "I'm sick."

"Well, so am I," declared Old Henry, staring at the broker. "You make me sick! Here you gone and bumped off a coyote that would 'a' tooken every cent you had, and your watch and them diamonds, and, most like, beefed you if you'd 'a' got sassy — and now you're moanin' and groanin' 'cause you done it!" Old Henry's back grew chilly. Percival might have blown his head off instead of the bandit's. The broker's fusillade had been the result of blind fear. Afraid to let go of the team, which stood tensely eyeing that huddled shape by the roadside, ears aslant, and backs curved, ready to break and run at the least excuse, Henry Watkins's temperature mounted to normal again. He had asked Percival to help him. Now he commanded. "Take holt of the hosses' heads — and hang to 'em. I'm goin' to load this here stage-robber aboard. And don't forgit, if them hosses git away from you, it's ten miles to Solano, and you'd blow up before you made five. Ain't no water, neither."

Percival knew enough about horses to take a short hold back of the bits and talk to them while he held them. The animals sensed his fear and trembled. Percival's pallid face was glossy with sweat. He was in mortal dread of being dragged and trampled, but the mere act of hav-

ing something definite to do helped steady him somewhat.

Old Henry managed to hoist his burden to the top of the mail sacks and lash it there. Then he picked up the shotgun, gazed at it as though it were some strange and curious thing, and shoved it, unloaded, beneath the ropes on the mail sacks. He climbed to the seat, took the reins and released the brake. "Hop in!" he called to Percival. The broker limped round and clambered up heavily.

They swept along the morning road at a trot, the horses eager to reach home. Old Henry presently turned to the broker. "I reckon you figure you owe yourself five thousand dollars," he remarked. "Heard tell you offered five thousand for the capture of that bandit."

"Well, I guess I earned it," said Percival, reaching in his vest for a cigar.

"Only that wasn't the one what held me up the other night and made Miss Percival light down," declared Old Henry. "This here one is short and stocky. The other was slim-built and kind of supple. Wonder what the next one will look like?"

"When will we get to Solano?" queried Percival, who did not care to discuss bandits, dead or alive.

"Oh, in time to warsh up and eat," said Old Henry nonchalantly.

"You — you don't seem to mind this sort of thing?" said Percival, glancing over his shoulder.

"Drivin' team? Nope. I been at it, off and on, since I was a boy, back in Texas."

"I mean the — the —"

"Oh, *him!* Well, I'll allow this ain't no hearse. But he's plumb peaceful, now. Out here you kind of take what comes and jog along. Nothin' else to do. Feelin' better since you lit one of them cigars which you don't offer to nobody?"

"I think my shoulder is dislocated," declared Percival with some austerity.

"Wonderful shot you made, aimin' plumb at the off hoss's head and pluggin' the night-rider like that. Now I'd 'a' been so scared I couldn't hit a flock of bandits."

"I didn't intend to sit still and be murdered in cold blood," said Percival. "I noticed that you didn't do anything."

"Well, not much. All I done was to knock up the barrel of that gun when you fired at the hoss's head. Wonderful shot!"

"You needn't get sarcastic. And you can thank me that you are living, this minute."

"Mebby I kin. But I ain't goin' to. You're a bluff! You was scared most to death, and you went plumb loco, and him with the drop on us! I ain't freighted you from Antelope without

sizin' you up, Percy. And you sound kind of hollow to me. You been ridin' me pretty hard for lettin' your young lady git took, and suggestin' I ought to be in the Old Folks' Home, 'stead of drivin' stage. Next, you'll be braggin' as how you saved my life by shuttin' your eyes and firin' both barrels in the air. You are the kind that has to buy everything you git, but I admire to say you don't git everything you buy — with money. I'm goin' to give you a little free advice. Don't let the folks around Solano git the idea you *kin* shoot, or somebody'll git so durned curious he'll call your hand — and I don't aim to freight any more free corpses on this here line."

Percival, who had begun to regain his nerve, puffed at his cigar and squared his shoulders. His manner was distinctly professional. "I'm quite capable of taking care of myself without advice from any hack-driver. And, moreover, don't call me Percy. My name is Percival — understand?"

"All right, Percy. But you sound hollow to me."

The broker's pallid face grew red. "You ought to be fired, and if I have any influence, you'll get fired! I'll show some of you hicks a trick or two! I'm on to your game with both feet! You frame it up with some thug to kidnap my ward and hold her for ransom. I suppose, if I were fool

enough to pay, you and your pal would split the money and figure you trimmed a sucker. If the man back here on the mail sacks is your friend, I'm dam' glad I got him! Why, your own sheriff says he knows who held up this stage, the first time! Swell bunch of crooks for a white man to associate with!"

"Kind of hazin' your nerve back into the home corral by gittin' mad, ain't you? Now you ought to tell that to Johnny Trent. He'd be interested."

"Who in hell is Johnny Trent?"

"Him? Oh, he's just a young, good-lookin', no-account puncher that took to runnin' wild, a spell back. He done stuck me up and took Miss Percival from the stage, one night. Mebby you heard tell of it? It was in the papers."

"Another one of your friends, I suppose!"

"Him? Well, I'd hate to say. But they's folks will tell you he was pow'ful friendly with Miss Percival. And since I got acquainted with you, I can't say I blame her. You come out here for information, and I reckon I've give you some. Only, if you meet up with Johnny Trent, don't take to abusin' him like you done me, for he's mighty touchy, and a right good shot, if I do say it."

"I'll get to the bottom of this!" declared Percival, tossing away his half-smoked cigar.

"Plumb to the bottom, if your foot slips."

CHAPTER XVIII

"Flowers," declared Tecolote Pete to the card-man from Silver City, "don't care who they lay on." (From "Coroner Pike's Notebook.")

SOLANO, awaiting the arrival of the mail stage, viewed the removal of the dead outlaw to the back of Baker's store with various low-voiced comments, chiefly interested in the fact that the man was unknown in that section of the country. Samuel Percival's arrival created a livelier interest, especially after Old Henry Watkins, when questioned as to details, admitted that Percival had shot the bandit. Solano folk found it difficult to reconcile Percival's demeanor with the cold fact in the back of the store. The broker was so obviously ill at ease, nervous, all but hysterical under the calmly curious scrutiny of the people.

Baker, called from his office, questioned Percival in the doorway of the store. But the broker seemed to hear nothing that Baker said. The storekeeper's naturally pertinent questions seemed insulting to Percival, whose conventional mind demanded a more formal recognition of his presence and his immediate needs. He was hot, tired, dusty. His unsettled nerves called for their customary stimulant. His suitcases and bags had not been taken from the buckboard by a

flunkey. No one came forward to show him to a hotel and flatter him with the obsequiousness he was accustomed to in Chicago. He felt that circumstances had discounted his importance. He raised his arms and shook his hands as though to silence his questioner.

"For God's sake, give me a drink, if there's any decent whiskey in this dump!" he blurted. "I'll pay for it."

"Certainly, Mr. Percival," said Baker soothingly. "Just step back here to my office. You have had quite a shock. I feel upset myself."

"I'm not a bit nervous! Never felt better in my life. But I don't intend to stand here like a witness in a murder case with these hicks staring at me. I want a room and a bath and a decent meal. Worst food —"

"Which would you like first?" queried Baker mildly.

"A drink. If you've got any good whiskey, trot it out. I'll pay for it."

"We sell almost everything but that," stated Baker. "And I make it a rule not to serve whiskey in public. If you'll step back here —"

Old Henry Watkins touched Percival's arm. "You're forgettin' your baggage, Mr. Percy."

"Well, bring it in, can't you! Get a move on! Here!" And Percival fished a dollar from his pocket and thrust it at Old Henry.

Henry took the coin and gazed at it curiously, then with huge disdain for both donation and donor, he tossed the dollar toward the group around the mail stage. A Mexican boy caught the piece of silver and scampered for home. Baker pushed past Old Henry and fetched Percival's baggage into the store.

Old Henry, still barring Percival's way, seemed to be waiting for something. Baker questioned the driver.

"I'm waitin' for my money for freightin' Mr. Percy from Antelope to Solano — twenty dollars."

"Twenty what?" Percival's voice was high-pitched in affected astonishment and indignation. He was of the kind that always quarrels with hotel bills and service.

"Twenty — of the same as I thrun out in the street a minute ago," replied Old Henry. "Regular charge."

"This is absolute robbery!" stormed Percival, turning to Baker.

"Yes, it is," said Baker. "The mail contract is robbing me every day. The stage doesn't pay expenses. I am thinking of raising the charge to twenty-five dollars, one way."

"Well, you'll keep on losing money as long as that old fossil drives your stage," asserted Percival, producing a bill. It was a new, one-hun-

dred-dollar bill drawn from a wallet containing a neat packet of similar bank-notes. It was intended to create astonishment and embarrassment.

"You're taking chances," said Baker, shaking his head. "A check-book would be much safer, and I think I can always accommodate you." Baker stepped to the post-office window and had the bill changed.

When Baker turned his back, Old Henry thrust his lean fist under Samuel Percival's nose. "For two pins and a button, I'd push your face down your throat!" and Old Henry's voice sounded somewhat like seltzer siphoned against a brick wall. "If I ever get a fair chance at you —" Old Henry lowered his arm as Baker returned with the change.

The group outside the store had witnessed this little tentative passage-at-arms. "What's the matter with the hombre in the nightshirt?" called one of the group. Solano was not accustomed to linen dusters.

Old Henry muttered and shook his head like a horse that has been stung on the nose by a bee. He pushed his way through the folk around the stage, climbed up and drove to the stable.

"Somethin' queer goin' on," declared a bright citizen.

And this sage remark fixed itself in the minds

of those who heard it to be resurrected as a handle for much discussion that afternoon and succeeding afternoons, when Percival, entrenched in a room in the Johnson boarding-house, refused to show himself on the street in the daytime, conducting his affairs by proxy in the person of Mrs. Johnson, whom he paid lavishly to carry his notes and messages to Baker. And Baker, as overlord of Solano, found time to attend to the dispatching of telegrams by special courier to Antelope, putting himself and his organization at the service of the broker with the courtesy of the small-town potentate who takes pride in being hospitable to visitors. And day after day the whisper ran about town: "Something queer is going on."

Nothing was heard of Grace Percival. The indentity of the person responsible for her disappearance remained unknown. Johnny Trent was in and out of town from day to day. It was rumored that the Chicago broker was sick: also that he was drinking heavily — and, again, that he was afraid to be seen on the street for fear of meeting with Old Henry Watkins who had threatened him. Others, deaf to these rumors, frowned sagely and declared that the broker would never show himself in public so long as Johnny Trent was in the vicinity. Neither Baker nor Mrs. Johnson had a word to say anent the matter. Consequently the town mind hardened

against them, jealous of their silence. Curiously enough, Johnny Trent became a sort of hero to the townsfolk. No one declared outright that Johnny had held up the stage and kidnaped Miss Percival — yet the glory was all his. Mr. Percival represented the unknown, outside world and all the naughtiness thereof. Johnny stood for the known, the familiar condition and prospect, and the concrete romance of the West. And it has been said that East is East.

CHAPTER XIX

He who hides behind a tree to spy upon a lady,
Intensifies the obvious by doing something shady.

OLD HENRY WATKINS, returning from Antelope the week following the arrival of Mr. Samuel Percival, was unaccompanied and consequently found time to piece together the puzzle which had been distracting him for several days. From Concho to Solano he drove in the rain, shrouded in an old slicker, humped over, and peering with incurious eyes at the familiar road while he endeavored to visualize the missing piece of the puzzle. His preoccupation was so intense that he allowed the team to lag, arriving in Solano some two hours behind his usual schedule. He blamed the road, complaining to Baker that the Black Mesa section had been crowned too high — that the wheels slipped sideways on the light scum of mud covering the highway. Baker took mild exception to the criticism, declaring that Johnny Trent's road work had been well done.

"'Road work' is right," said Old Henry. "You could pretty nigh call him a 'Road Agent' and not stretch the truth any."

"Hear anything about Miss Percival while you were in Antelope?" queried Baker.

"I been workin' out some ideas of my own," declared Old Henry obliquely. "Mebby I can tell you more in a couple of days."

Next day was lay-over day for the stage. Long before Solano was awake, Old Henry had saddled one of his spare horses and had taken the foothill trail leading to the timberlands south of town. Leaving the trail before he reached the high mesas, he rode through the timberlands, always toward the south, and ever alert to avoid being seen. A little before noon he arrived within the dense timber back of Johnny Trent's homestead. He tied his horse and proceeded to investigate on foot.

He stalked the shadows until within a hundred yards of the cabin and then concealed himself behind a giant spruce and spent the succeeding two hours watching the cabin and the clearing roundabout it. His one regret was that he could not see the doorway from where he was concealed. The cabin faced the east and the open meadow. Old Henry argued that he had nothing else to do but watch and wait, and incidentally chew tobacco. The elation of the quest kept his ancient pulse going steadily. However, he was impersonal in his attitude toward the mystery. The persons involved in the mystery meant little to him — the mystery, everything. No appeal of sentiment stirred him. The cleverest Pinkerton

in the country could not have made him jealous. He flattered himself that he was about to solve a problem which had baffled the local authorities — and that is the way he phrased it to himself, having, in common with his kind, the gift of quoting handsomely from newspaper articles when he felt the occasion called for convincing speech. And this was an occasion. Old Henry, watching and waiting behind a giant spruce, was convincing himself that his efforts were chastely altruistic, and in no way founded upon a subconscious desire to "get even" with Johnny Trent. As for the matter of the reward money — Old Henry disliked to think about that. The reward would be paid by Mr. Samuel Percival. Old Henry finally concluded, however, that the two could be separated, and should be separated, and that he was the man to do it. Meanwhile, he paid strict attention to his chewing tobacco from which he drew great solace. Constant gazing dims the eye. Old Henry's eyes were already dim from age and weather. Consequently, when a woman came from Johnny Trent's cabin and stood gazing out across the meadow and then turned and walked to the corral, Old Henry's eyes had to adjust themselves to the vision, even after his mind had adjusted itself to the vehement conclusion that it was a woman and was *the* woman. There was no mistaking that slender

and graceful figure that stood close to the corral bars, evidently making friends with the two horses that switched flies lazily in the midday heat. Old Henry felt that his quest had been a success. Yet, now that he had solved the problem, another problem presented itself. If the young woman from Chicago were a prisoner, why did she not saddle one of the horses and ride to Solano? She seemed to be alone. And Old Henry knew that Johnny Trent was in Solano.

Satisfied with the result of his morning's outing, Old Henry stepped back cautiously, intending to blend himself with the deeper and farther shadows that concealed his horse. He could have turned and walked away naturally: but he chose to back away, meanwhile keeping his gaze fixed on the figure by the corral. His heel caught in the loop of a root. He sat down suddenly upon the splintered stub of a broken branch. He declared "Ouch!" and other superlatives of distress. He was up like a scared cat. With a fleeting glance toward the distant corral, he turned and ran through the forest.

Grace Percival had already noticed that the horse she was patting had been gazing curiously past her and not at her. Then came the crackling sound of some one or something falling, followed immediately by the distinctly human "Ouch!" and similar minor explosions. Both the corralled

horses snorted and jumped. Grace Percival turned swiftly, and just in time to catch a glimpse of a man disappearing hastily within the shadows of the timber.

Frank Lopez, seated in the shed back of the cabin, was mending a pack-harness. He came on the run, as Grace Percival called to him. When she told Lopez what had startled her, Lopez immediately saddled one of the horses and spurred into the timberlands. He picked up Old Henry's tracks and followed them to where a horse had been tied. Lopez read the sign with the thoroughness of a good tracker, following Old Henry's swift career until assured that the tracks led toward Solano. Wondering who had been spying upon the cabin, Lopez turned and rode back, wisely refusing to be drawn too far away from the cabin by a possible ruse.

Johnny Trent had been gone several days. Lopez wondered that the señorita, as he called Grace Percival, should seem so contented in the obvious loneliness of the high country. The Mexican surmised that present conditions could not exist indefinitely. Something would happen to change the monotony of the idle days. He had little to do, which suited him exceedingly well; yet he would have preferred action, adventure, anything that would trend toward clearing away a certain somber misgiving that troubled him.

Frank Lopez feared that the señorita would cease to love Johnny if Johnny continued to spend his time in Solano and not at the cabin. Johnny had stolen her, had run off with her, which was understandable and very fine, according to the Mexican's ethics. But to neglect her! Por Dios! But that was the great sin.

Meanwhile, Old Henry Watkins, having John-Gilpined into Solano, was telling the deputy sheriff to watch Johnny Trent.

CHAPTER XX

"When he who fled the wrath of man, a stranger to the land,
Reined round and gazed toward Salvador, far miles across the sand,
While Thirst and Madness waited still, hard-by on either hand."

IN the rugged, wild, and untraveled country, far miles to the south of Solano — a country ridged with densely timbered hills and furrowed by deep and tortuous cañons — Hartshorn, the outlaw and murderer, a victim of the elements, had been three days on foot trying to find his way to some known landmark. He climbed the brushy wall of a box cañon into which he had strayed, and, realizing that, if he did not arrive at some habitation soon, or chance upon some kind of wild game, he would starve to death, he deliberately set his face toward the north and trudged doggedly across the timbered crest of an unnamed range, heading, so far as he could approximate, toward the last habitation he had noticed when coming into the hills — the homestead of Johnny Trent. Three days behind him lay the rain-flattened ashes of a tiny camp-fire, and the white and scattered splinters of a pine, shattered by the thunderbolt that set him afoot in the wilderness. Ever fearful of pursuit, he had made an early camp, allowed his horse to graze

for an hour or so, and then he had saddled him and tied him to a low spruce beneath which he himself intended to sleep. When the mountain storm shook the earth with bolts that seemed to drive straight down, Hartshorn had watched the horse closely, fearing that he might stampede. The bolt that shattered the giant pine near the camp stunned Hartshorn for a moment. The horse reared back and broke the tie-rope. Hartshorn heard him crash through the underbrush. With no chance of following the frightened animal, Hartshorn waited until daybreak and then trailed him to a mountain meadow several miles north. He saw the horse grazing near the edge of the meadow. Hartshorn walked toward him slowly. The horse continued to graze, merely lifting his head to gaze at the man on foot. Then, startlingly shrill came the nicker of another horse. Hartshorn dropped flat in the meadow grass anticipating the appearance of a rider. Had he kept on toward his horse, he might have caught him; but following the trumpet challenge from the timber encircling the meadow came a band of wild horses, manes flickering and tails floating as they charged out into the meadow, stopped, whirled, and rocketed back into the forest. Hartshorn's horse, with head up and nostrils quivering, followed them — disappeared in the morning shadows of the dripping pines. Not daring to

risk the southern desert on foot, the outlaw chose to risk being captured rather than attempt to reach the Mexican border. He did not intend to give himself up. He planned to steal a horse from the corral of the lone homestead on the mesas and again turn south — if necessary, shoot down any one who happened to oppose him, help himself to provisions, and trust to the frequent mountain rains to obliterate his tracks.

For two days after he had lost his horse he had managed to exist on the can of tomatoes and a few crackers that he had left rolled in his slicker the evening of the storm. The rest of his provisions was in the saddle-pockets.

The third day of his wandering he had eaten nothing, and strangely enough he had seen neither deer nor turkey in a country where such game was plentiful. He had counted upon killing a deer in the high country. There were many tracks in the soft earth beneath the trees, but through some strange freak of circumstance the wild things of the summer forest had remained invisible. Hartshorn's usually alert senses became numbed through fatigue and weakness. Capable of long hours in the saddle, yet he was unused to walking, and the country which he traversed was of such a nature as to try the hardiest. Unshaven, haggard, his clothing torn by the brush, he fought his way across ridges, through cañons, and down

hillside brush until late in the afternoon when he came suddenly out upon the mesa trail a half-mile below Johnny Trent's homestead.

Realizing that he had overshot his mark, Hartshorn back-tracked through the timber-lands, paralleling the trail until he reached the edge of the clearing round the cabin. There he lay watching while the long shadows of early evening deepened and spread. He had kept a packet of tobacco dry in his hat. He chewed the powdery tobacco and it dulled his hunger.

An hour before sunset a woman appeared, coming from the cabin and carrying an empty pail. The woman called to some one. A man's figure appeared from somewhere back of the cabin. Hartshorn heard the woman ask the man to get some water. Not knowing how many folk might be about the place, the outlaw decided to wait until supper-time — then steal up to the cabin and take them unaware.

CHAPTER XXI

"Oh, East is East and West is West . . .
They met in a desert town,
And each did his [something unprintable] best,
To stare the other down."

JOHNNY TRENT had witnessed Percival's arrival in Solano, and all subsequent gossip did not change Johnny's immediate opinion of the broker. Johnny kept his opinion to himself despite the many opportunities for giving, or lending it. Johnny did not draw any hasty conclusions. He was not in the habit of doing so. In fact he did not have to. Johnny's conclusions were already sketched on Mr. Percival's person. Overlooking the too ample belt-line, the fat shoulders, and the general physical flabbiness of the broker, despite well-tailored garments, Percival's face plainly told what manner of man he was. The direct and arrogant stare of his full eyes was not inspired by fearlessness and frankness, but rather by a brazen disregard for that or those at which he stared. His mouth was disproportionately small and straight-lipped. His jaws were wide with fat and his ears small and set close to his head. There were those in his home town who considered him genial, forceful — a strong character. Rather, he was superficially suave, stubborn, and intolerant. Johnny Trent

did not catalogue; he got it all at once, as did Baker and Mrs. Johnson. Percival was what is commonly called a "four-flusher," the type of man who quarrels with waiters, bell-boys, hotel clerks, and Pullman conductors, believing, with a pitiful lack of intelligence, that he is asserting his own importance, whereas a truly superior man does not have to assert anything to make his worth apparent.

Johnny Trent was intuitively aware of all this at a glance. And knowing his man, Johnny arrived with primitive directness at a hopeful conclusion. Grace Percival should have the opportunity to choose between the broker and himself, and, in so doing, put an end to the impossible situation which existed. Her decision would settle the matter, once and for all. Should she choose to go back to Chicago with the broker — then she could go, and there would be no further argument. Should she choose to stay, Johnny would protect her and also protect himself if need be. As to the right or wrong of it all, whatever Grace Percival decided would be right. To arrange a meeting, it would be necessary that Percival be told that his ward was at the cabin in the hills. Percival could talk with her there, alone. Johnny did not intend to give Percival a chance to summon witnesses or aid of any sort. Johnny would handle the matter himself.

Against this decision rose the barrier of convention and circumstance. Percival was entrenched in his room at Mrs. Johnson's, unwilling to show himself on the street and chary of giving audience to any one save the deputies, with whom he held lengthy discussions. And the four deputies, lingering in Solano, with instructions from the sheriff to keep an eye on Johnny Trent, were not admitted to the broker's room until they had been vouched for by Baker as officers, and not highwaymen in disguise. During their interviews Percival emphasized his power to purchase service. The deputies listened politely, but were in no way deceived by the broker's vehemence. It was only too evident to them that the broker's chief concern was for his own life. He seemed to think that having shot and killed the bandit, Bender, he had in some way laid himself open to attack by the lawless of the country. He even went so far as to donate four hundred dollars toward expenses entailed in searching for Grace Percival, but as the donation was made in cash — a hundred to each deputy — it was tacitly understood by these officers that they should constitute themselves an unofficial bodyguard while he was in Solano. Naturally, Johnny Trent knew nothing of this, so when he asked for an interview with the broker, and was refused, he followed up his request by climbing the stairway

and entering Percival's room, unaware that one of the deputies was in an adjoining room, an unlocked door between them.

"My name is Trent," said Johnny as the broker started up. "Mrs. Johnson said you couldn't see me, so I thought I'd see you."

"But —"

"Sit still and listen. I'll make it short. Walk out to the first bridge west of town, on the Concho road, in about an hour, and you'll meet somebody who can tell you where Miss Percival is. But come alone, or you won't find anybody there. Leave your money here. This deal don't call for money."

Percival stared. Johnny regarded the broker with a gaze as fixed and as impersonal as the gaze of a sleepy panther bored by a curious crowd.

"But see here!" exclaimed Percival. "This is a matter for the authorities! You don't expect me to risk my life —"

"You won't risk anything — if you got sense. I'm the last man that wants to tangle with you. Only — come alone, if you've got the nerve."

Percival tried again to stare Johnny down, but Johnny seemed to grow in size and potency. "Just a minute and I'll call —" The broker gestured.

"Don't call any one," said Johnny quietly.

Percival, recalling what Old Henry Watkins

had said about a certain Johnny Trent, feigned willingness to consider the proposal. If this was the man who had held up the stage and kidnaped his ward, this would be a rare opportunity to trap him and put him where he belonged — in the penitentiary. There was a deputy in the next room. Percival's preoccupation was not altogether assumed. "I'll meet you," he declared finally.

"I didn't say I'd be there," corrected Johnny. "I said you would meet somebody that could tell you where Miss Percival is."

"I see. Well, I'm greatly indebted to you, Mr. Trent. But I could hardly arrange to be at the place mentioned in an hour. There are some business matters requiring immediate attention. In fact, I was writing a letter when you interrupted me. Suppose we say two hours from now. It is two o'clock. You may expect me at four."

"I didn't say I'd meet you," reiterated Johnny. "But somebody will."

Johnny backed out, closed the door and swung downstairs. Immediately he mounted his horse and rode out of town — but not toward the bridge on the Concho highway. Rather, Johnny circled toward the foothills south of Solano, and there, screened by the junipers, he watched to see if he had been followed. Percival's intent was only too obvious. He meant to tell the dep-

uties of the proposed meeting and ask their advice before appearing anywhere in person. And that was what Johnny had anticipated and desired. From the vantage of the foothills Johnny watched the Concho road and within the hour he saw four riders leave town and drift slowly toward the bridge. Nearing the bridge they drew apart, evidently intending to surround the low wooden structure. Johnny mounted and rode swiftly back to Solano. Tying his horse outside the livery corral, he climbed the fence and came through the back entrance to the office. Upon inquiry, Johnny learned that the liveryman had instructions to have a buckboard and team ready for the broker at half-past three. Wishing to gain time against the deputies' mistrusting that something was amiss when Percival did not appear at the bridge at the appointed hour, Johnny invited the liveryman over to the cantina. Fifteen minutes later the liveryman drove over to Johnson's and sent up word that he was waiting. Percival came down, declaring that the other was ahead of time by a half-hour. The liveryman produced a thick watch and announced that it was just three-thirty. The broker was too excited to dispute the assertion. He climbed to the seat, settled himself, and glanced round nervously. The team started with a lunge. The nigh front wheel screeched as the

buckboard swung round in a sharp curve. The driver's breath was significantly aromatic, and Percival attributed the other's mistake as to the correct time to liquor. Then, the liveryman was driving east instead of west.

"Hold on!" cried Percival. "You're going the wrong way!"

The driver was evidently having trouble with the team. The lean, wall-eyed buckskins showed a sincere desire to run. The buckboard swept down the street, the horses at a gallop. "They'll ease down after they run a couple of miles. Then we'll head back for the bridge," declared the driver, casually.

Percival gripped the seat-rail and held his breath. Finally he realized that the driver was allowing the team to take its own wild pace. "You're headed the wrong way!" cried Percival.

The driver nodded. "Turn 'em and swing back, in a minute. They'll steady down in another half-mile."

The buckboard lurched from the highway and down into a sandy draw. The team stopped, and one of the buckskins bit the other on the neck, by way of encouraging further wild progress; but the driver seemed exceedingly sober and capable, holding the team with one hand and helping himself to plug-tobacco with the other.

Johnny Trent, astride a horse and leading

another, appeared round a shoulder of the draw, reined up, and sat smiling at the broker. "There used to be a bridge here, but it was washed out a couple of years ago. Mebby I forgot, but I thought I said for you to meet me at the bridge *west* of town, at four? You're ahead of time and at the wrong place. And I think I said to walk out, alone."

Samuel Percival saw that his treachery had been anticipated. This young, casual Westerner had been too shrewd for him. The liveryman, sedately chewing tobacco, seemed altogether disinterested in the meeting.

Percival summoned all the nerve he had left. "Well, say what you've got to say, young man. This party driving the team don't count."

"Nope — I only figure," murmured the liveryman.

Percival gained a little nerve through heat of anger. "You were ordered to drive to the bridge, and not out here!" he declared. "And you're drunk!"

"Mebby that accounts for it," responded the driver. "East and west is all the same to me when I'm in liquor. All I remember is north."

"I'll see you in jail for this!" cried Percival, swinging his arms in a manner intended to be forceful and impressive.

"For what?" queried Johnny.

"For your damned impertinence, young fellow! If you think you can bluff me —"

"Get down!" said Johnny.

Johnny gazed at the broker's flaccid face. Percival assumed a jovial manner. "Go ahead! Say what you've got to say, and —"

The driver of the buckboard sat gazing at the horses' ears. Johnny Trent flicked a fly from the shoulder of his horse with the end of the reins. Percival felt the sweat trickling down his back and chest.

"Get down," said Johnny. And Percival got down.

Coincident with his alighting, the team became restive again. The buckboard was cramped sharply. Before Percival could summon breath to protest, the liveryman whipped the team up out of the arroyo and disappeared.

"Now," said Johnny with a quick gesture, "you can step up on this horse. He won't pitch you if you don't try to hold him in too strong or jerk his head round. If you do, he'll pitch you so high your clothes'll be out of style when you light. You're fat — and most like you'll break your neck. Ride ahead, up this draw. You won't get lost, because I'll be with you. I'm taking you to have a talk with Miss Percival."

Percival did as he was told for the very good reason that he was doubly afraid of Johnny

Trent — because of what Old Henry Watkins had said, and because he himself had informed the sheriff's men of the proposed meeting.

"You'll give me a square deal?" quavered the broker.

"I'll do that!" declared Johnny. "And not because I got any liking for you, or got anything against you, even if you did try to rope me and tie me by setting the man-chasers after somebody at the west bridge. I'm forgetting that. All I know about you is what Grace has told me — and that's plenty. Seems you been pestering her to marry you till she just naturally left town and come out here. Now I got an idea she don't like you a whole lot. Mebby I'm wrong."

"Then Grace is safe?"

"You bet! And a darned sight safer than her money, from what she told me of the folks handling it. And you're one of 'em."

"But if she is living up here — in this country, why couldn't she come down to Solano to see me? Did she send for me?"

"Not that you'd notice. This is my party. Keep on riding, and nobody is going to harm a hair of your head, if you behave. Only, I got some use for you, and you're going with me. Just let that horse have his head and he'll take you where you're going."

Mr. Samuel Percival of Chicago was surprised

that he felt no inclination to do other than he was told. Here he was, accompanying this irresponsible, uncouth, illiterate young cow-puncher — Mr. Percival knew what illiterate meant when applied to any other than himself — into a wild and uninhabited country, and no telling what might happen, or when he would be allowed to return. He reasoned that young Trent's promise of an audience with Grace Percival might be a trick to lure him into the wilderness and hold him for ransom. Or Trent might have been friendly with the dead outlaw. Percival did not care to pursue that idea to a definite conclusion. If his ward had actually sent for him, well and good. He thought he could reason with her, persuade her to return with him. He could not conceive that Grace cared anything for the young ruffian. Why, the man was nothing but a common laborer who had worked on the road — so Baker had said: although Baker had called him a foreman — same thing. As for Grace marrying the man!

Samuel Percival's fat back grew cold. Perhaps she had married him! Grace was headstrong, in her way. And if she had, her inheritance, of which the interest had been more than sufficient for her expenses, would be transferred to her on her marriage day. Percival dreaded even to imagine such a contingency. Her money, to which he had access, was already involved in a

speculation that threatened to bankrupt the firm of Percival & Percival.

As the draw grew deeper and the country more rugged, the broker paid strict and unnecessary attention to the trail, fearful that the horse might lose its footing. Climbing out of the draw to the timberlands they rode through a still and shadowy forest — a ride that seemed interminable to the Easterner who began to lose his earlier confidence in the good-will of his companion. He wondered if the deputies were still waiting for him at the bridge, and what they would do when they heard that he was missing from Solano. He realized that he was virtually a prisoner of the grim young fellow he had so recently planned to trap. He surmised that he would appear ridiculous before Grace Percival. He had hoped to pose as her rescuer, make her appreciate the hazards he had run in searching for her. As for the matter of the telegram calling her to Chicago because of the motor accident — that could be put aside as a joke.

Twice during the long ride through the afternoon forest, Percival thrust his hand into his coat-pocket and fingered the little automatic he always carried, in town or abroad. And the nearer he came to the end of his journey — Trent had told him they would arrive at their destination before sundown — the more deter-

mined he became to declare himself, chiefly because of the change in Trent's manner from that of captor to that of one performing an unpleasant but imperative duty. Percival surmised that the young fellow might be in love with his ward, but that his real purpose in kidnaping her was for ransom. The broker even went so far as to conclude that the sheriff, the stage driver, and Trent were all in the plot. Well, they wouldn't get one cent of his money. This young Trent had been the active figure in the enterprise, and, judging from his present manner, he regretted his act.

Suddenly the forest opened upon a wide, grassy meadow. The horses stopped. Across the meadow, against the edge of the farther forest, stood a log cabin. "Grace is over there," said Johnny, gesturing.

"Before we go any farther," said Percival, assuming an offhand manner, "I might as well tell you that the young lady you have been calling 'Grace' is my wife. Kind of jars you, doesn't it? Yes, we were married, secretly, just before she came out here. Maybe that'll make a difference — when we have that little talk about the matter you want to settle."

Johnny laughed. "You're a mighty smooth liar, ain't you?"

Samuel Percival, inspired by the dread of

financial ruin and the threat of the penitentiary, held himself to a measured and natural reply, which seemed sincere, emanating from the sincerity of desperation. "Just as you like," he said, and he smiled casually.

He lied so well that Johnny believed him. Johnny's gaze turned toward the distant cabin against the forest. "That's all right," he said presently. "But up here it's just you and me and Grace. She's going to say which is the man she wants — you or me. And there won't be any argument after that."

They rode on across the meadow. Johnny hallooed. Frank Lopez appeared from back of the cabin, a rifle in the hollow of his arm. Then Grace Percival came to the doorway, hesitated, stepped out, and stood watching the horsemen approach. A glint of hate showed in Percival's full eyes as he glanced at Johnny Trent s young, lusty figure: but Johnny was gazing straight ahead as though there were nothing in the world more worth his attention than the slender, graceful figure, bareheaded in the afternoon sunlight, poised as though questioning the reality of that which she saw. Percival grew hot with anger as he realized that this girl, whom he had known since she was a baby, seemed unmoved, quite herself, aside from the startled look that shone for an instant in her eyes and was gone.

Percival got heavily from his horse, walked up and down a few paces to ease his stiffened muscles, and then turning raised his hat with mock politeness. He assumed the attitude and manner of the generous tyrant — for Johnny Trent's benefit. "Well, Grace, I suppose you call this a vacation; but I don't."

"Why, Sam! I didn't expect you."

"I guess you didn't!" Percival took in the surroundings with a deliberately scornful stare. "So you prefer this sort of thing to Solano? And God knows that's bad enough."

Grace Percival hesitated, glancing at Johnny. Then she turned to the broker. "I suppose you know what happened, or you wouldn't be here?"

"I know, well enough. You seem mighty glad to see me, don't you?"

"I am very glad you have recovered from your accident."

"We needn't discuss that, just now. What are you doing up here?"

"Doing? Why, making the best of it. Try to do that, and you'll really feel more comfortable."

Johnny excused himself and led the horses to the corral, Lopez striding beside him and talking earnestly.

Percival stepped close to the girl. "What does

it mean — the whole business?" he queried brusquely.

"It means that I made a mistake when I allowed you even to think that I could marry you. I made another mistake when I thought I could flirt with Johnny Trent and not fall in love with him. When I received the telegram about your accident, I started for Antelope immediately. I think you know the rest."

"Letting yourself off easy, eh? Well, I don't know the rest, but I'm going to. I am supposed to be your guardian, and I'm responsible for what you do."

"Yes? Mr. Trent asked me to marry him."

"Huh! Is that all?"

"Absolutely. But of course I can't. It would not be fair to him. I shall go back with you. There is really nothing else to do. But I want you to know how I feel about it all. Don't imagine I am unhappy, or that I have been mistreated. To the contrary, I have rather enjoyed this experience. I am wondering what would have happened if you had not come. You see, I can trust Johnny Trent."

"Trust him! And he's the man that kidnaped you and bundled you off up here to this shack! You mean to stand there and tell me that you care enough for that common cow-puncher to marry him? You'd look swell washing the dishes,

and his clothes, and mopping the floor and feeding the hick! Why, he couldn't buy you a pair of shoes a year! Are you crazy?"

"Please come inside!" said Grace Percival, gesturing toward the cabin. "You are tired and hot — and utterly out of your element. We'll be having supper directly. After supper we can talk all we wish, while I wash the dishes."

"You wash the dishes! You must like the life!"

"I do."

Percival stared at her, unable to believe that she meant what she said. So that was it? She intended to live on her own income, and support that fellow Trent. She didn't know, however, that her income and capital were involved — her bonds put up as collateral in a speculation that might or might not turn out well. The broker followed Grace Percival into the cabin where he made it obvious that combing his scanty hair with a ten-cent comb and washing in a common tin basin was not what he was accustomed to. He glanced at the table — the cheap knives and forks, the plates and cups, and the sugar in a lidless coffee can.

"You mean to say those guys out there are going to eat with us?" he queried as Grace Percival fetched some biscuits from the oven.

"Why not? This is Mr. Trent's home."

"And you're the cook, eh?"

"Yes. I'm not altogether helpless."

"Well, I'm damned if I'll sit down with those highbinders," declared Percival.

Grace Percival smiled. The broker appeared ludicrous, out of poise, and unable or unwilling to exhibit the slightest degree of courtesy, even for her sake. His "My-dear-young-lady" attitude irritated her. His coarseness she could overlook as it was innate and not deliberate.

"Uncle Sam," she said, knowing how he disliked to be considered anything other than a suitor, "hadn't you better take a walk over to the edge of the woods and back — and cool off? We'll wait supper for you. You'll be hungry when you return — and when one is actually hungry, tin plates really don't matter so much."

"Thanks for the suggestion. You can feed those two cow-punchers, and when they're through I'll come back and have dinner with you."

Samuel Percival could not adjust himself to conditions as he found them in the household of Johnny Trent. Grace was actually cooking and waiting upon Trent and Lopez as though they were her kin. Nor did she seem to find it an effort to do so, but rather a pleasure. He had imagined his ward would consider him a rescuer, a hero — one who had risked his life to find her and take

her home. To the contrary, Grace Percival had shown no great surprise at his arrival, but seemed altogether absorbed in the menial occupation of housekeeper, not even pausing in her tasks as she talked with him. He took his hat and strode out, as he thought, impressively.

The heat of his irritation carried him briskly across the meadow to the edge of the silent and austere forest. He paused, surveying the unfamiliar solitude with disdain, then, gradually, with respect and awe. For the first time in his life he realized how infinitesimal he was in the great plan and movement of the universe. But his egotism would not allow him to ponder long. He turned to walk back to the cabin, glancing about nervously. To his right, a few yards from where he stood, he saw the figure of a man, crouched behind a tree, evidently watching him. Percival's first impulse was to demand what the other wanted, but he lacked the nerve. So, pretending that he had not seen the other, he took a cigar from his pocket and lighted it. Then he began to walk slowly toward the cabin. As for the fellow behind the tree, he was some friend of Trent's set to guard the place against a surprise. So Percival argued, but changed his mind before he was halfway across the evening meadow. Chances were that the watcher behind the tree was one of the deputies from Solano who had trailed them

that afternoon and was waiting for the right moment to make himself known and arrest young Trent. And the idea appealed to the broker exceedingly. With Trent out of the way, it would not be difficult to persuade Grace that there could be no reason in the world for her remaining in the West. The cowboy had been so sure of himself — so autocratic. But there was a surprise coming — and soon. Percival felt elated — so elated, in fact, that he entered the cabin and took his place at the table with the others, and even essayed a jovial remark or so: but he got no response from either of the men. Lopez ate hurriedly, and, picking up his rifle, left the room.

"I suppose that friend of yours stands outside so that he can drop anybody that comes or goes without the boss's consent, eh?" said Percival.

Johnny glanced up. His gray eyes held the broker's uneasy glance for an instant. "Yes — that's my friend, Frank Lopez. He's a good shot when he's sober, and he hasn't had a drink for two weeks."

The outlaw, Hartshorn, crouched behind a tree, had been watching the cabin as the sunset shadows drew down. He had seen the two riders cross the farther meadow, and he had wondered what the fat city man wanted up in that country. Later, and believing himself invisible in the dusk

of the timberlands, Hartshorn had viewed the city man at close range. He looked prosperous — but the outlaw was not after money. He needed food and a horse. And the other had not seen him, but had lighted a cigar and had strolled across the meadow. The four persons were all in the cabin, probably having supper. And there seemed to be no one else about the place. He had about made up his mind to cross the clearing, but hesitated on account of the faint light which still flickered over the meadow. In a few minutes it would be dark. And as he waited he saw the figure of a man come through the doorway, and proceed to the back of the house. Then came the sound of a horse plodding toward him. Hartshorn drew back into the deeper shadows. The horseman rode past and continued on along the trail toward Solano.

CHAPTER XXII

. . . "And we found eight empty shells and one of those little automatics on the floor. Seven of the shots had gone wild. The eighth, or maybe it was the first, got Johnny right between the shoulders. He didn't know that it was Percival got him. He thought it was the other man. . . ." (From Undersheriff Owens's Report.)

THE swiftly fading twilight accentuated the stillness and solemnity of the high country. The small kerosene lamp in Johnny Trent's cabin illumined the faces of the three, gathered about the table as though waiting for something to break the natural pause in conversation following the evening meal. Johnny rose and cleared away the dishes and stacked them on the sink-shelf near the stove. Grace Percival sat with her hands folded in her lap, gazing pensively at her slim, white fingers, and especially at a jeweled platinum ring, a trinket worth more money than Johnny Trent could earn in a year of hard work. She had purchased the ring herself, and occasionally wore it, and because Percival had tried to buy jewels for her, which she refused to accept, the broker observed her preoccupation frowningly. She ought to be wearing his ring, or, rather, several of his rings. He knew how to buy for a woman — dresses and jewelry and such things. Percival grew aware that she was then

quite unaware of his presence. Her habit of drifting into day-dreams had always irritated him. He could never understand why one person in company with another should not talk. She could talk entertainingly when she chose.

While the lack of convention in the appointments of the queer cabin annoyed him, Percival felt that somehow the place was a home, and he attributed this to Grace Percival's presence. And he felt safer in her presence — free to assume his old, blustering importance and say what he thought. And this man Trent of whom he so recently had been afraid: why, the fellow was actually boorish in his silence. He seemed depressed, aware of his uncouthness. Now was the time to show him up, and let Grace see what sort of a man he really was.

Percival ran his thick finger round the inside of his collar. "Well, what have you got to say?"

Percival's manner was that of a cross-examining attorney who knows that the court will countenance almost anything from him except physical violence. In this case — so the broker assumed — Grace Percival was the court, and the man hiding in the forest, the constable. Johnny found it exceedingly difficult to keep his temper, yet he held to the main issue, chiefly because both Grace Percival and the broker were guests in his home.

Percival misinterpreted Johnny's awkward restraint. Assuming that the deputy would soon make his appearance, the broker became ponderously subtle. "I suppose you sleep with that belt and gun on you," he said, "but you don't need it when you are talking to a gentleman."

Johnny refrained from making the obvious rejoinder. He unbuckled his belt and hung the holstered gun on the wall. He turned toward Percival. "I fetched you up here to tell you that I took Miss Percival from the Solano stage, that night, and that she came up here against her will. I asked her to marry me and she said she wouldn't. I'm taking all the blame for this deal. She couldn't help herself. Once I thought mebby she liked me pretty well — but she don't care anything about me. It was my mistake. I had no business letting myself get to care for her. She never gave me a reason to think I ought to care for her, and —"

Percival gestured impatiently. "What's the use of telling me that stuff? Money's what you're after. I offered a reward for the discovery of Miss Percival. I'll write you a check and we'll call it square."

"No, you won't," said Johnny.

"It isn't a question of money, at all," declared Grace Percival.

"Then I suppose it's case of love at first sight,

or something like that? Well, don't you forget I've got something to say as executor of your estate. You are my ward, and, until you are married, the bulk of your estate is invested according to my judgment." Percival saw the flush that darkened Johnny Trent's face, and he smiled.

Grace Percival turned swiftly to the broker. "You haven't a right to disturb one cent of my money — and you never had. And you needn't mention it again. I am going back with you. There is nothing else to do. But that is my own decision, not yours."

"So you're sick of all this Western bunk, eh? Well, I don't blame you. And your bandit friend, here! Why, he's licked, right now."

Grace Percival rose. "Sam, I wish you wouldn't make a fool of yourself." Then she turned to Johnny. "It is my fault — all my fault! I know you can never forgive me. I thought I cared for you — when you told me about the wild horses, and the gray stallion. But when you went away, and I realized that I could never marry you —" Grace Percival hesitated, then swiftly, gracefully, she drew the jeweled ring from her finger. "Please take it as a keepsake. You risked your life to catch the gray stallion for me. Surely you have earned —"

Johnny shook his head. "I don't need that to remember you by." He turned away, swung

round again. "You can have the cabin to-night, Grace. Mr. Percival can sleep in the lean-to, back of the house. I'll have horses ready for you in the morning."

Johnny was halfway to the door when a step sounded outside. A ragged figure, gaunt and soiled with pine needles and dirt, with sunken eyes glaring like those of a famished wolf, stood framed in the doorway. Johnny, who had anticipated the appearance of Lopez, did not at first realize what that fearsome figure meant. The outlaw, Hartshorn glanced at the three in the cabin, but held his gun centered on Johnny Trent's belt-buckle. Johnny thrust up his hands, and Percival thrust up his hands, not realizing that he had done so. Hartshorn sidled round the cabin to the stove and snatched a biscuit from the plate on the sink-shelf. He ate wolfishly, his deep-set eyes glaring from beneath his matted hair. He kept his right hand advanced, covering Johnny, who noticed that, in spite of the man's famished condition, the hand that held the gun was as steady as a rock. Percival shook as though with a chill. This man, that he had thought was a deputy, was obviously some outlaw, perhaps a murderer, and desperate beyond all argument or suasion.

Grace Percival's face was pale but she did not lose her poise. "Why, he's starving!" she ex-

claimed, as the outlaw gulped down chunks of biscuit.

"You said it!"

"But we will give you something to eat. You don't have to steal it."

"That ain't the idea," mumbled Hartshorn.

"What is the idea?" queried Johnny. The obvious danger — for it was only too evident that the stranger was a hunted man and desperate — seemed to restore Johnny to his old, sprightly self. "You can have all you want to eat without sticking us up for it," he continued. "And if you want to see how the country looks, over toward the desert, I can let you have a horse, if you'll turn him loose when you get back to your own wagon. It ain't the first time a puncher has got lost up here, and couldn't connect up with his own outfit. Just take it easy — and we'll sure forget that we saw you."

Grace Percival, and even Percival himself, frightened as he was, realized that Johnny was endeavoring to placate the man by assuming, or pretending, that the other was some puncher who had become lost in the high country. Yet Hartshorn suspected treachery, knowing no other than his own standard. He grabbed up the remaining biscuits and thrust them into his pockets. He sidled along the wall, snatched Johnny's belt and gun from the nail, and tossed them

through the open window. Johnny was wondering how the man got past Frank Lopez, and where Lopez was. As Hartshorn passed close to Grace Percival, he noticed the jeweled ring on her hand. "I'll take that!" he said, gesturing with his gun.

"Let him have it, Grace!" quavered Percival.

Hartshorn, inferring from Percival's dress and manner that the woman was his wife, glared at the broker contemptuously. "You ain't even got nerve enough to fight for your own woman! Do you want me to bump off this buckaroo fearin' he'll get her?"

Johnny saw the glitter of the jeweled trinket as Grace Percival drew it from her finger and held it for the fraction of a second before she dropped it into the outlaw's clutching hand. Johnny had no romantic idea of making a dead hero of himself. But Grace Percival had offered to give him the ring as a keepsake. And, moreover, a guest had been robbed in his own house and that guest a woman — *the* woman.

Unwittingly Grace Percival turned the trembling balance that launched Johnny at the outlaw like a panther leaping upon a steer. She gestured appealingly toward the hunted man, surmising the desperate physical need that swayed him. "I'm sure no one here wishes you any harm," she said. And as she said it, Johnny leaped and grabbed for the outlaw's arm.

Percival saw the two men strain together, heaving up on their toes as Johnny thrust the outlaw's arm above his head. "Outside!" cried Johnny to Grace Percival, fearing that a chance shot might hit one or the other of the terror-stricken onlookers. Hartshorn snarled, and fought to free his arm. They spun round, crashed against the cabin wall, and staggered toward the middle of the room. Grace Percival cowered in a corner of the cabin, her hands against her breast. Percival, seemingly paralyzed with fright, stood stiffly watching, his hands still above his head. Hartshorn's shirt-sleeve ripped from wrist to shoulder, freeing his arm from Johnny's clutch. Grace Percival screamed — and Percival, shivering like a man with palsy, went mad. He thrust his hand in his coat pocket, jerked out the automatic and fired blindly at the two men. Johnny, poised to charge at the outlaw again, stopped as though stricken by a thunderbolt. The outlaw jumped back and dashed through the doorway. The blunt roar of a shot shook the imprisoned air of the room. The lamp on the table seemed to burst of its own volition. Percival gasped at the sudden shock of darkness, then, dropping his pistol, turned and ran, out and across the meadow, stumbling, cursing, trying to shout for help, and by chance barely clearing a post of the open gateway — open because of

Hartshorn's precaution in leaving a free way for himself if he succeeded in stealing a horse. Far out on the dim, starlit meadow Samuel Percival stumbled along, heading toward the south, thinking that he was going toward Solano.

Hartshorn, after shooting out the light in the cabin, jerked Johnny's saddle from the peg beneath the porch roof, and made for the corral. He caught up and saddled the bay pony, Chico, and swung out toward the south and the timber. Crossing the second meadow at a lope, he heard the sound of hoofs pounding along the edge of the farther forest. He swerved sharply, then, after a few seconds of listening, he headed south again. He had startled a band of horses grazing in the big meadow — the wild horses of the high country, although he did not know it, but thought they were stock belonging to some isolated homesteader; possibly to the man back there in the cabin whom the fat man from the city had shot in the back.

CHAPTER XXIII

"Once it was told of the stallion gray,
That he bowed his neck to a cunning hand:
Yet free with his kind he runs to-day,
Like a storm-blown cloud of the mesa land.

"Once, in the light of the upland stars,
The ghost of an old hate barred his way,
And he struck, that carried the rowel-scars,
And flayed as the hoofs of the lightning flay."

PERCIVAL'S blind panic drove him to superhuman effort. His overworked heart forced the blood into the swelling veins of his throat until he could scarcely breathe. Finally he sank down on the meadow grass and lay trembling and gasping, and, as he thought, utterly spent. Yet as he lay writhing, clutching at the grass, sobbing, and altogether demoralized — paying in those brief moments of helplessness and self-torture for years of loose habit and indulgence — terror prodded him to his feet again. He must keep on until he came to some habitation, and safety. He could still hear the sharp, staccato bark of the automatic as he had emptied it at the two struggling figures. He had heard a woman scream, as Johnny Trent, poised to charge at the outlaw a second time, dropped as though struck by a great, invisible fist. Perhaps the bullet that had

shattered the lamp on the table had struck that slender, staring figure in the corner!

Crazed by fear and horror, the broker staggered on, stumbling over the hummocks. Some one had been shot, in the cabin, back there! But he was alive, unharmed. If he could reach Solano —

Slowly his bemused faculties awakened to the sound of another drumming than that of his overworked heart. Some one was coming after him, riding swiftly. The soft thudding of hoofs sounded behind him. He began to run, his arms outstretched against the blackness around him. He had crossed to the middle of the big mesa south of the homestead when the speeding hoofs swept past. Again he stopped, through sheer physical inability to go farther. He sank to the earth, hiding his face in his arms. He was afraid to raise his head, to try even to ascertain where he was. But he would get up again and go on — reach Solano. Like a man lost in the wilderness and blindly positive that his compass is wrong, and that he knows the way out to safety, Percival made himself believe that he was on the way to Solano, while at the same time he realized that he did not know where he was going. Yes, he would rest a few minutes, then get up and continue toward Solano. He repeated the name of the town to himself — because obsessed with the

sound of it. Presently he was conscious of the sound of another horse speeding past in the night. The sound grew fainter, faded into silence. A strange weakness crept over him, as though he had been immersed in tepid water, realizing it, yet scarcely feeling it. He had no desire to get up now — to go on. He wanted to rest, to drift into forgetfulness, to get away from the strident pounding of his heart that seemed to be hammering the word "Solano" into his brain. Each beat of his heart shook him as the throb of an engine shakes a ship fast-moored to a wharf.

In the stupor of fatigue he was slow to grasp the significance of a deep, muffled roar, like the mutter of far thunder in the hills. The distant thundering swelled and ebbed and seemed to shake the very ground on which he lay. He ceased clawing at the grass roots and heaved himself to his knees. The grim muttering grew heavier, deeper. A quick gust of wind swept across the starlit mesa. The viewless horror was almost upon him. He did not know what it was — save that it was some mighty force, loosed, his final instinct told him, to destroy, to annihilate. He gazed with staring eyeballs into the night. He thought he could see the wavering outline of some gigantic thing moving swiftly toward him. With a last, flickering effort of will, he rose to his feet, flung out his arms against the grim shadow that

drove down upon him. Then he saw, almost upon him, the hurtling shapes of many horses — a mass that split and swerved suddenly past on either side, even as the gray stallion, the fighting horse that had once felt the sting of rope and rowel, reared and struck downward with hoofs that slashed and flayed and beat like muffled hammers upon a crumpled and quivering heap in the misty meadow grass.

The wild horses flung on — two flying wedges that were united again as they swung sharply toward the east. With heads high they swerved and swung and surged back from the rim of Twin Blue Cañon, stringing out and running south, fearful of the cañon trail and the remembered trap below. Without a leader, presently they stopped, sniffed the cool air, milled restlessly. A far, shrill trumpeting startled them to action. They flung up their heads, trotted toward the sound, stopped. Then a silvery shadow drifted toward them. A mare trotted from the band to meet the gray leader. Their nostrils touched. The mare leapt back, squealed, and whirling kicked at him, as she smelled that which had splotched the stallion's hoofs and forelegs with red.

CHAPTER XXIV

"A puncher, riding Solano slope,
With a brand-new saddle and a brand-new rope,
Sang a little old song you may have heard,
And then he whistled like a mockingbird —"

JOHNNY TRENT, however, had not whistled for many a long month. It is doubtful that he would have been allowed to whistle in the hospital at Antelope, where he had lain with a bullet-hole through his lungs, unconscious for hours, and for days afterward scarcely aware that he was actually alive. He knew that some one other than the nurse came to his room frequently, nodded and smiled and stole softly away again. Finally, as he grew stronger, he learned that this person, coming, as it were, out of a dream, and vanishing again, was the girl he had met in the high country, ages ago, when he was young and able to ride the trails, and was his own man. Now he belonged to any one that chose to own him, and the doctor and the nurses seemed to have taken possession of him. As yet too weak to realize time as marked by the hours and the days, he did, however, realize that the girl who was not a nurse did not come to see him any more. So the next day after the girl failed to appear — Johnny thought it was the next day, although a week had elapsed since Grace Percival had left Antelope —

he asked where she was. He was told that Miss Percival had left for Chicago, but only after the surgeon had assured her that his patient was out of danger. Well, Johnny considered that natural enough. Grace Percival had decided to return to Chicago in any event. Later, when he found that his hospital bills had been paid, he worried a bit, and asked questions, and became generally irritable, which was a good sign.

The day he left the hospital, free to face the southern hills and home, the head nurse gave him a tiny parcel, explaining that Miss Percival had left it with her to give to him. Johnny wanted to know if any one had left a note or a message for him. Yes, the nurse told him, Mrs. Johnson of Solano had called at the hospital, as had Mr. Baker and his daughter Julia. "Sure they would," said Johnny, "but there wasn't anything else — any other message?" The nurse shook her head. Johnny thrust the little parcel into his coat pocket. He did not know what it contained — and he thought he didn't care. Grace was gone — and that was all that mattered, one way or the other. Johnny thought that she might at least have said good-bye, not aware that Grace Percival had come to his room when he was asleep — that she had knelt down beside his bed, taken his limp and all-but-bloodless hand in her hands, and kissed it again and again in fare-

well, just before she had left for Chicago. Johnny's nurse might have told him this, but she did not, because she was a woman, young, good-looking, and poor — while Grace Percival was young, good-looking, and wealthy. However, it is doubtful that such news would have cheered Johnny in the least.

He opened the parcel before he left Antelope and found within it the jeweled, platinum ring which he knew so well. But he could not understand how Grace had recovered the ring. The last time he had seen it, it was in the clutching hand of the outlaw with whom he had fought in the cabin. Not until he returned to Solano did Johnny learn how and when the ring had been recovered — and Frank Lopez did not elaborate, stating simply that he had returned the ring to Miss Percival after he had himself returned from a two days' ride in the desert south of the homestead. With Johnny and his friend, a nod and a gesture were sufficient.

Frank Lopez was more eloquent about the finding of the body of Samuel Percival, possibly because he was in no way connected with the broker's sudden and horrible and almost literal transmutation to clay. He explained, carefully, however, that the Chicago man was dead when he found him, significant, as Lopez had not stated the same thing about the outlaw, Hartshorn.

One thing troubled Johnny considerably, and that was the realization that he actually cared nothing for Julia Baker, other than considering her a stanch friend. Once he had thought that he cared for her, but that was before he met Grace Percival. Now, he felt as though he had been, in some vague way, disloyal to Julia; that she deserved of him more than he could ever give. Even the belief that he would never see Grace Percival again did not change him in his attitude toward Julia Baker. He could not go back. It was too late for that. There was but one woman in the world he could ever really care for — and she was as far from him as the farthest star. Johnny thought that the best thing he could do was to try to forget — and in setting himself the task, he managed to think of Grace Percival more often than he cared to acknowledge to himself. As he found that it was too late to go back to Julia, so he found that it was too late to forget Grace Percival — that forgetting is accomplished only through its own volition. His illness had refined and sharpened his sensibilities until they became somewhat like the proverbial quills of the "fretful porpentine."

Johnny had been back in what he called his own country for a year. He had not heard from Grace Percival nor had he written to her. His pride carried him past the gaze of curious towns-

folk, who wondered and gossiped. Work carried him past many a sullen hour of pondering and revolt at that which he knew he could not change.

Baker, keeping stride with the times, had begun to build roads — and one especially, traversing the high country back of Solano. Eastern folk were just beginning to discover that section of Arizona which offered excellent hunting and fishing, and vistas so varied and magnificent that each new discoverer told his friend, and so enthusiasm grew into demands for pack-horses and saddle-horses and guides. Johnny Trent, who knew the back country better than even Baker himself, was put in charge of the road-making, and Frank Lopez became foreman of one of the road gangs.

Winter finally put a stop to the work, so Johnny moved over to Baker's ranch and went to work repairing and rehabilitating the one-hundred-and twenty miles of fence that enclosed the storekeeper's range. Johnny was not content to lose a working day. He had determined to repay Grace Percival for her generosity in taking care of his hospital bills if it took him the rest of his life to save the necessary money. Of course, she could afford what she had given — she was wealthy. But that did not make it less imperative to repay. Johnny reasoned that he would never see her again. He would send the money through Baker,

who would know how to handle the matter. When the money had been repaid, Johnny planned to build a comprehensive camp for hunters and fishermen and tourists, to be located on the site of his homestead. He spoke to Baker about it. The storekeeper was interested in the idea, realizing the value of such an establishment in that isolated section.

Meanwhile, Johnny rode along miles of fence, inspecting, repairing — but not whistling. The winter swung round to the dry season and everybody prayed for summer rains.

Then the high-country road-making began again. Johnny did not visit Solano often, and when he did, he stayed only long enough to order supplies and check up pay-roll and time-sheet.

Riding down to Solano one pleasant summer morning he found himself pondering the happenings of the past two years. He believed that he could almost come to forget some of these happenings, if he kept busy at road-building. He made up his mind that Grace Percival meant less to him now. No doubt she had resumed her social life and would recall him only occasionally. Well, that was all right! But she might at least have left some message of farewell at the hospital. And she had — but Johnny would have treasured a note from her, in her own handwriting, more than all the jewels in the world. Johnny

asked himself why *he* had not written to her? He might have done so, and might have received a reply. He was still thinking about it when he tied his horse in front of Baker's store; and while waiting for Baker, he picked up an old mail-order catalogue and glanced through it. He finally laid it aside and picked up another catalogue. It was of a Chicago firm. He did not open the catalogue, but replaced it, and while doing so came upon a wrapped newspaper addressed to himself. He tore the wrapper off. The paper was nearly a year old. It seemed that everything he touched on the desk had "Chicago" printed on it. The paper was a Chicago paper, and among the items was one telling of the failure of Percival & Percival, emphasizing in detail the financial catastrophe which had left Grace Percival penniless, her personal fortune having been used, without her knowledge, in bolstering up a shaky speculation in which Samuel Percival had involved more than one shrewd business man.

Johnny folded the paper and tucked it in his hip pocket. Presently Baker came in. They discussed the road work. That afternoon, while riding back to camp, Johnny Trent whistled, for the first time in many a long month. It seemed a strange thing to do, when he had just learned that the woman he cared for was practically a pauper. Yet it was because of this that Johnny whistled.

That morning he had told himself that he would never see Grace again. Now he knew that he would see her again — and that he would have something to say to her.

The next time that he rode down to Solano, Johnny asked his employer for a two-weeks' leave of absence. This was granted grudgingly. Baker depended a greal deal on Johnny's knowledge of the high country and his ability to run a line for a practical road. "Lopez will stay with it till I get back," said Johnny, but he did not say where he was going.

It remained for Old Henry Watkins to spread the news that Johnny Trent had taken the East-bound train at Antelope. When Julia Baker heard this, she thought she knew where and why Johnny had gone. But not even Grace Percival herself knew what Johnny went through, nor how desperately close he came to not finding her, before he finally discovered her teaching school in a not too select section of Chicago.

CHAPTER XXV

THE NEW ROAD

IT was remarked by two or three of the more observant that Johnny Trent had returned to Solano alone. It was also remarked that he whistled cheerfully. He immediately reported to Baker, and the following day returned to his work in the high country. The big log camp and the individual cabins, work on which had begun the week before he left, were already beginning to look like an establishment. In order to anticipate the fall hunters, Baker had sent up an extra force of men. Baker had financed the project under a partnership arrangement which contemplated Johnny's personality making the venture a success. Johnny was to assume the responsibility of laying out new trails to favorable hunting and fishing locations, select and purchase saddle and pack animals, arrange for competent horse-wrangles, cooks, and guides, and see to provisions and equipment. And he went at it with a zest which kept his right-hand man, Frank Lopez, on the trot most of the time. Baker finally suggested a formal opening of the camp with the usual local advertising, local crowd, and barbecue. Johnny held out against the idea.

"Lots of hunting camps in the West," declared Johnny. "Most of 'em are advertised in the magazines, back East. And those little old advertisements read about alike. If we want to fall in line and advertise like they do, we can get some trade, at first. But the best trade — the kind that keeps coming year after year and fetches along some friends each trip — is the kind that thinks they have discovered a real place that nobody else knows about. Real sportsmen don't like to sit in with the kind you find at the regular dude camps. I aim to run this place like I would run a cow-outfit — top hands and top horses. It'll make its own name in two, three years. And we got the finest game country, and the most beautiful. Some folks are just naturally going to fall over backwards when they take a look at the cañons and hills up here. But we'll have somebody standing behind 'em, to catch 'em and prop 'em up so they can take a second look. It's new country — and nobody can really say how fine it is."

"It's wild country, yet," said Baker, in a tone which implied a lingering regret that it should ever become otherwise.

Johnny glanced shrewdly at the storekeeper. "I had an idea, once, that I could hold out against what was bound to happen to the West — sort of keep some of these hills and cañons to myself.

But the East is discovering us mighty fast. What helps some is that a fellow is so proud of this country he is willing to show it to any one — like you would show a good horse or a fine bunch of cattle."

Baker, who had ridden up to see how the work was progressing, called attention to the men who were dismantling Johnny's old cabin.

Johnny nodded. "Don't fit in with the rest of the buildings," he said casually. "I aim to use the north wing of the main camp for my headquarters."

"Suit yourself," said Baker, "but the north wing is big enough to house a small family."

"Maybe it will — some day," said Johnny.

On the high mesas the grass stood to the horses' knees. The October air, so clear, so radiant with the sparkle of sunlight, had an indescribable tang that inspired to activity. On the far meadows colts, that had lived close to their mothers' shadows all that summer, grew suddenly independent, clicking playful heels at the amiable mares who watched them run and cavort in wide circles. The rich, black soil of the timberlands was aflame with innumerable bright-hued flowers. Lush, green-edged, were the banks of the meandering hill streams, and emerald hollows marked the cienagas of coarse grass and purple water-plants. Round each broad meadow swung

a circle of stalwart pines, blue-topped, aloof, sublimely indifferent to the flower-dappled grasses at their feet: their business was with great vistas and the sky.

The new road from Solano approached these magic highlands with circumspection, as a good road should. It neither hurried nor lagged, but climbed steadily. Here it showed on the cut of a scarred hillside, and there it disappeared within a brown-pillared archway of shadowy blue. Rising to the first mesa level, it seemed to hesitate, as though undecided as to where it should go. But Johnny Trent had overcome the road's indecision. Instead of crossing the open, the new road swung into the timberlands, breaking from the forest suddenly at the second mesa where it swept straight on to a high gateway above which ran the simple legend: "Trent's Camp."

As Johnny rode down to Solano that morning, he whistled. He seemed to have acquired the habit. He tickled Pronto with the spurs and grinned as Pronto jumped and shied. There was room to shy — on the new road. Johnny talked to Pronto, who carried one ear back and the other forward. It wasn't exactly the square thing to do. It was a new road, and Pronto was much more at home on the old, rough pitches of the original train. Johnny had deliberately chosen the new road, in spite of a peculiar urge to take the old,

narrow trail with its hazards and quickening memories. The trail was the shorter route to Solano, but then, Johnny was in no special hurry. The stage would not arrive until noon.

In Solano, Johnny strode into Baker's store and found the rotund little man at his desk looking very judicial. "Now, what have you been up to?" he queried, his blue eyes twinkling.

"Up to the camp," replied Johnny innocently.

With great deliberation Baker chose a slip of paper from among the letters on his desk — the copy of a telegram relayed by telephone from Antelope. Johnny waited while Baker read the message, although he knew Baker was familiar with it, word for word. Baker thrust the slip of paper at Johnny.

Johnny took it, glanced casually at it, and tucked it in his belt. "Thanks," he said, as though the other had given him a match.

"Oh, I'm not as surprised as you think, young man!" declared Baker, still maintaining his judicial air.

"No? 'Course, Grace could have signed it 'Mrs. Johnny Trent,' and that would have looked mighty fine to me. But she knows I like her first name better than I like my last name —"

"Your wife! You young scoundrel, do you mean to tell me that you are married? Of course, I knew that you went to Chicago. But —"

"I did mean to tell you, but I won't, now. Yes, I'm married." Johnny nodded vigorously. "Don't I look all right?" He drew himself up, flexed his arms, stamped his heels until his spurs jingled, and then, with a glance at the clock, he strode from the office, swung up on his horse . . .

Baker rose and walked slowly to the doorway. Johnny was dusting it down the Concho road.

The Solano stage, a mile or so out on the mesa road, drew toward the speeding horseman. And the speeding horseman, standing in his stirrups, took the copy of the telegram from his belt and read it again. "Will arrive in Solano Monday. — Grace."

THE END

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